

STEVE OF THE BAR GEE RANCH



MARION REID-GIRARDOT



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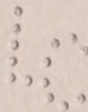
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STEVE OF THE BAR GEE RANCH

A Thrilling Story
of Life on the
Plains of Colorado

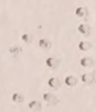
MARION REID-GIRARDOT



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DEDICATED
TO
MY HUSBAND

whose many adventures on the
Plains furnish much of the material for
this story.

PREFACE

This book is a mixture of facts and fiction, and my motive in writing it is much the same as that which prompts an artist, who seeing a splendid bit of coloring in the sky, works feverishly to transfer it to canvas before it is lost forever.

The story is not a biography of any one person or persons. I have simply combined characters and incidents as I saw fit. Some of the people I created, but most of them are taken from life, and can be met in a day's ride from Denver.

However, most of the incidents actually occurred, and are only a few of the many which the cowboys encountered as they followed their hazardous occupation. They lived strenuous, busy lives, but through it all kept a refreshing boyishness, which enabled them to look death in the face with cheerfulness, and when they met a maiden to their liking, to woo her with impetuosity.

In the cities, constant rubbing of elbows smooths down the rough edges, and brings about a certain sameness in characteristics. One person becomes much like his neighbor. But on the Plains, there was room for growth. Each was able to maintain his own individuality. Strong characters were developed, and many acquired peculiarities of manner and speech, which were good-naturedly ridiculed, but genially tolerated.

I use the past tense in writing this preface, for in the brief time I have known the West, I have seen the Range close in, and the picturesque, rollicking cowboy, replaced by the staid, plodding homesteader. I have seen the Plains, barren since time began, rolling in majestic splendor as far as the eye could reach, scarred and disfigured in attempts to wring from its reluctant bosom, nourishment for meagre crops of grain.

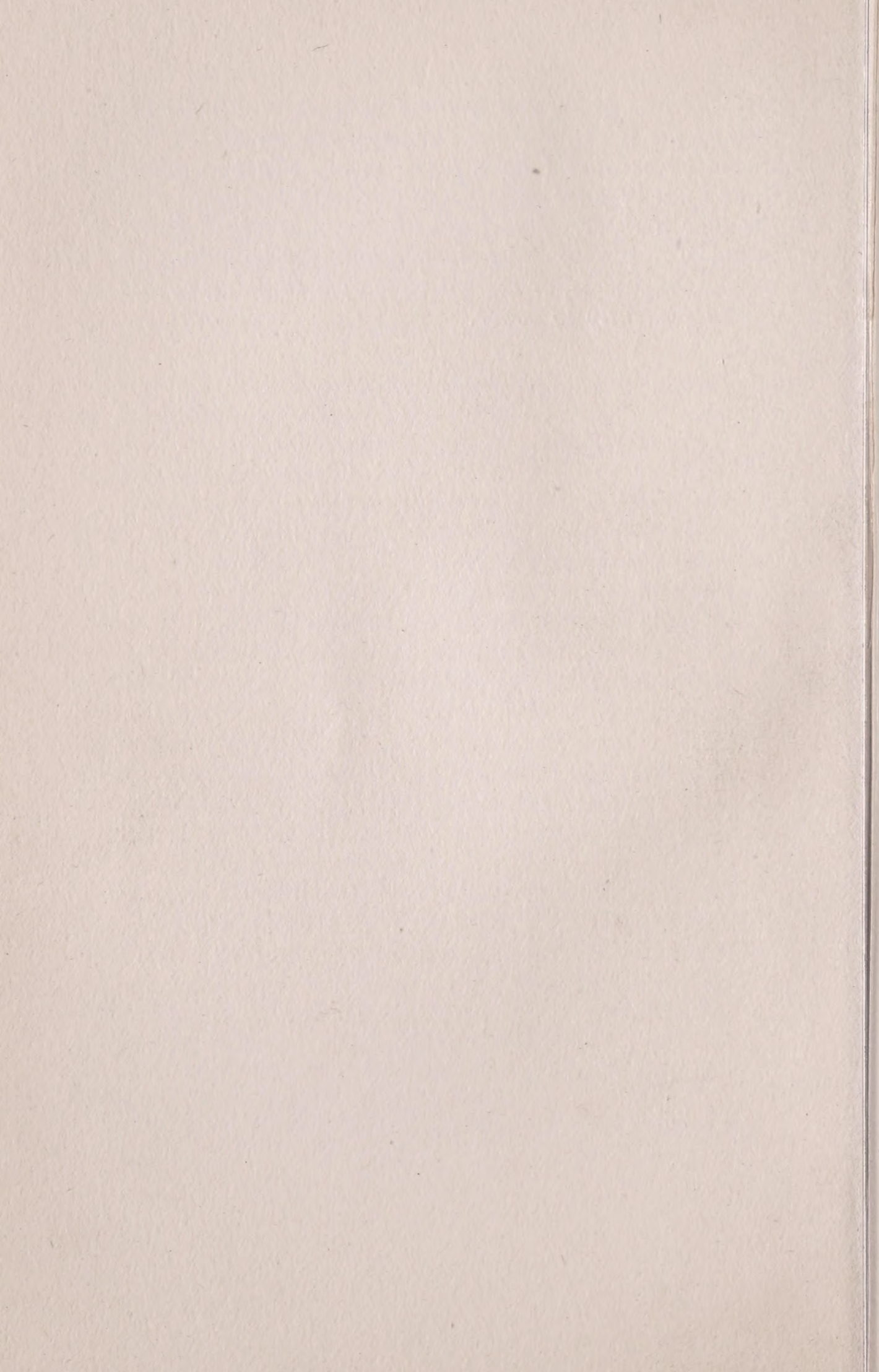
Wire fences now crisscross its surface, and instead of sleek cattle grazing by thousands in well-fed contentment, here and there a bleak, makeshift claim shanty, mars its beauty.

I suppose this is progress, and as such I should not decry it. Time, like a watchful policeman who guards an open thoroughfare, has called to the cowboy, "Move on! Make way for the procession which follows." To the cowman this has meant annihilation, as there was no place to go. Some few stubborn ones, unwilling to yield, have retreated to the fastnesses of the mountains, and there on the forest reserves their herds develop agility as they search for food. Many unable to adjust themselves have retired and moved to the city, either selling their ranches or turning them over to their children, leaving the younger generation to cope with the new conditions.

But as the heavily-laden wagon of the settlers comes groaning and creaking up to our door, the driver trudging wearily by its side, urging on his exhausted horses, I sigh for a glimpse of the gallant riders who with jingling spurs and flapping sombreros, dashed recklessly into view, and then drawing rein, with respectful salutation and quiet manner, proffer their request or make known their errand.

Suddenly realizing that their day had passed, and a

bit of romantic history was passing with them, I attempted this book, and if the reader does not feel the lure of the West, and the charm of life on the Plains, it will be because I have failed in my effort to depict it, and not because either is dull or uninteresting. For the lure is there. I feel it with every breath I draw; in every rare glimpse of startled antelope bounding off across the prairie, or distant view of a skulking coyote slinking silently to cover.



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STEVE OF THE BAR GEE RANCH

I

ENTER WOMAN NUMBER ONE

It was only a simple puzzle, composed of a single link of chain about two inches long, which contained a star with six points of different lengths, so placed that it was quite difficult to separate one from the other; but in the hands of little Miss Little, the new teacher, it had a drawing power, more potent than the strongest magnet. Blackie had shown it to her as the strains of the waltz died away, and she stopped where she was and coquettishly pretended to become intensely absorbed in its solution. Immediately there was a cluster of black-coated figures about her, and only a glimpse of her pink dress, which could be seen here and there, indicated to the rest what was the center of attraction.

Miss Little was pretty and no one was more cognizant of the fact than she. Her merry blue eyes, dark hair and saucy wit, bespoke an Irish ancestry. She had been a coquette from the cradle, and now found the susceptible cowboys easy victims to her wiles.

"Pshaw! I can not remove the star, and it looks so simple. Can you do it?" asked she, looking at Steve with an innocent, appealing glance.

"Yes," answered he. "But this is our dance. I'll show you how the next intermission."

"Oh, thank you," breathed she gratefully.

"Steve looked at her with a shade of suspicion in his eyes, but she was all guileless innocence. She noted

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the glance, however, and said to herself: "I'll have to be careful. He is pretty astute, and will not stand much trifling." When the dance was over Steve solved the puzzle for her, which like all others was very easy once you knew how, and then watched her with a lurking admiration in his eyes, as she daintily manipulated it, trying to put it back together; which was just as hard as taking it apart. She looked up with a sigh of relief when Ira claimed her for the next two-step.

"I'm so glad of an excuse for not worrying over that horrid puzzle. I am afraid Mr. Gardeau will think I am very stupid, as I could not do it after he showed me how, and as he is president of the School Board, it would never do for him to get that impression."

"Gee! Old Steve always was lucky. Has all the girls comin' to him lookin' for schools. Gets the advantage of all us other fellows. Think I'll try and get on the School Board in our district. If I do, the prettiest girl gets the place."

"Make a sort of beauty contest of it. I am so glad you told me for I shall not apply, now that I know the qualifications."

"If you do, I won't look at any of the rest. Burn up their letters as soon as I get them," said he gallantly. "And talkin' of applications, reminds me that I'm a goin' to apply right now to take you to the next dance."

"Well, you are a little late," stated Miss Little, demurely. "Both Mr. Steve and his brother are ahead of you."

"Which one are you goin' with?" inquired Ira.

"I do not know. I believe I will wait until all the applications are in, and then use your method of selecting a schoolma'am. Go with the best looking one."

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"Here you Steve," called Ira. "Miss Little says you and Blackie have both asked her to go to the next dance, and I have, too. She says she is goin' with the best lookin' one. Now, who do you think is goin' to win?"

"You sure don't think it's goin' to be you, do you?" inquired Steve, laughing. "We'll just decide that question right now. Here boys, line up. Miss Little says she will go to the dance with the best lookin' one."

"No, do not trouble. I do not believe I will decide that way," objected she, somewhat confused. "I'll go with the one of you three that is the first to arrive."

"Well, I'll just go over there and camp," resolved Steve. "You are stayin' at my sister's."

"I'm goin' over and ask Bill Colwell for a job tomorrow," observed Ira.

"He won't hire you. I'll work for him for nothing," said Blackie.

"No, that will not do," objected Miss Little, merrily. "You boys will have to turn it into a race. All meet some place and start at the same time."

"All right," agreed Steve, nothing loth. "We'll make it a novelty race. It's two miles and a half from our house to my sister's. We'll start from our place at seven o'clock, and walk our horses the first mile; trot them the second mile, and run them the last half."

"Who will be judges," inquired Ira, interestedly.

"There will not be any judges needed," stated Blackie. "There is only one place to cross that gulch which runs between our place and Colwell's, and that is at the road. The one that reaches that ford first will win, as it is only a little ways from the house and only room for one to cross at a time. The rest will have to follow single file."

"That's so," assented Ira. "There's liable to be a mix-up there."

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"Oh, I hope none of you get hurt," exclaimed Miss Little. "I never thought of there being any danger."

"Don't you worry any about that. Danger is what we thrive on," said Steve, recklessly.

When Mrs. Colwell heard of the plan she was filled with anxiety, and with feminine intuition, gave a very accurate forecast of the outcome.

"I do not like it at all," observed she to her husband. "Why can't she decide which one she wants to go with and end the matter? She has no right to come out here and stir up strife among my brothers."

"It won't stir up any strife, mother. They are all taking it as a joke, and are more interested in the race than they are in the girl," spoke Colwell, with true masculine obtuseness.

"That may be so now, but you know there has always been a rivalry between Steve and Blackie, which has been more or less friendly up to now, but it will be different once a woman comes on the scene. They'll both try to win her just to get ahead of the other, if for no other reason; but she is pretty enough to make any of the boys fall in love with her and just clever enough to have found out how things are between Steve and Blackie."

"Well, let's not borrow trouble. She probably will not marry either one of them. She seems mighty anxious about gettin' letters every mail day. Maybe she's already engaged."

"Engaged!" exclaimed Mrs. Colwell with much scorn. "Why she has pictures of half a dozen different young men on her dresser. And even if she was engaged do you think it would keep her from amusing herself with Steve and Blackie? It's like a cat playing with a mouse. She does not mean to be cruel. She is simply following her instincts. Miss Little is one

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of those soft, kissable sort of girls, with appealing, helpless ways that is very attractive to men. So is a cat's paw soft until you feel its claws."

"Well, I suppose they've got it comin' to them," Colwell philosophically remarked. "If she doesn't deal them misery some other woman will. No matter who either one of them took a fancy to, the other would try to cut him out."

When Saturday evening came Steve, Ira and Blackie, all ready to start, lined up outside the gate at the "—Gee" Ranch. The autumn twilight was just coming on and they would have ample time to reach their destination, i. e., the Colwell Ranch, before night. Each had a light-top buggy with a single horse hitched to it. They did not draw for places as they had the whole prairie before them for a track. No one cared to follow the road, which wound around more or less. Promptly, at seven at a shout from Pere Gardeau, they set off.

Now, Steve had the knack of training all his saddle horses to travel in a fast walk, which carried them over the ground quickly, and was much easier on both man and beast, on a long trip, than breaking from a walk to a trot or gallop, and then lapsing back to the original pace, as most saddle horses do; so he selected a horse called "Kentucky Jim" which was broke to harness, and a descendent of a thoroughbred Kentucky dam and a sire of old Revenue stock. He was long, and lank and homely, but fast in all his gaits. Blackie had a horse which was equally fast, while Ira was driving a blooded trotting mare belonging to old Man Milton, which he thought would put him away ahead on the second mile and give him a good start for the run, but he miscalculated. The mare fell far behind in the walking contest and what she made up on the trotting stretch was quickly lost when they started

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to run. This left Blackie and Steve racing neck and neck across the prairie; bouncing over cactus beds, bumping over soap-weeds and prairie-dog holes, straight as the crow flies to the Colwell Ranch. Each bent upon making the crossing before the other, and as Steve began to close in toward the road, Blackie reached out and struck Kentucky Jim with his whip and made him lunge aside.

"Well, keep the road, damn you," exclaimed Steve, and using his own whip, drove straight for the almost perpendicular banks of the gulch.

"Hold on, you fool!" yelled Blackie. "You can't cross there." But he was too late. The horse checked his wild run instantly on the edge of the gulch, and then, fairly sitting on his haunches, slid down the steep bank and clambered up the other side. The buggy careened and rocked about, but stood the strain, and old Jim lined out for one of his famous home-stretch runs.

Miss Little and the Colwell family were out to witness the finish of the race, and as Steve drove up the children danced up and down, delightedly exclaiming: "Uncle Steve won! Uncle Steve won!" and were quickly up in the buggy beside him, twining their arms around his neck and kissing him. But Steve, like the knights of old, looked beyond them for reward in the smiles of his lady, and these, Miss Little knew so well to give. However, when Blackie arrived, she managed subtilly to convey to him that she wished he had been the winner.

As they drove off to the dance Ira and Blackie followed closely to act as chaperones, as they claimed.

"You need not bother," remarked Miss Little, mischievously. "A school-teacher does not need a chaperone. We are used to making small boys behave, and you know a man is only a boy grown tall."

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At the dance Blackie approached Miss Little and putting on an injured air, said:

"You didn't play fair in that race. There ought to have been more than one prize. We always have a second prize in our races out here."

"There was always a third prize in all the races I ever ran," stated Ira.

"Had to be, if you won, didn't they?" inquired Steve, with good-natured sarcasm.

"Well, let's see," mused Miss Little. "I must follow the rules. That is what I teach the children. I am just crazy about riding horseback," said she brightly, "and Mr. Colwell hasn't any gentle horses."

"Just the thing," said Blackie. "I'll come and take you for a ride. When would you like to go?"

"Next Sunday would be a good day."

"It will be next Sunday in about ten minutes," promptly remarked Blackie, looking at his watch. "So get ready."

"Oh, I meant Sunday-a-week. I'll be too sleepy to go to-morrow."

"Where do I come in on this deal? What is the third prize?" inquired Ira.

"Well," drawled Miss Little, in her soft, plaintive voice. "I'll be home Wednesday eve, if you care to call."

Mrs. Colwell was right in her prediction. The race was but the beginning of a hotly contested suit for Miss Little's favor. Blackie rode up promptly Sunday afternoon, followed by a pack of hounds, and Miss Little tripped gaily out to meet him.

"Oh, you brought the dogs," delightedly exclaimed she. "Can we catch a coyote?"

"We can if we can find one. They are pretty well hunted off the range around here, and we can't go very far to look for them, as you are not used to ridin'."

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"I do hope we can find one, as I am always reading English novels in which the heroine is a superb horse-woman and rides to hounds. It seems to me it would be great fun. Last summer when I was East every one asked me about chasing coyotes and antelope, and seemed incredulous when I told them I had never hunted them. They seem to think that all sorts of wild game runs through the streets of Denver, and nibbles the front lawns. It is great what stories one can make them believe. They will swallow anything, and when I found they were so gullable I drew on my imagination and my, what hair-raising pictures I described," said she, laughing.

"Yes," assented Blackie. "They sure think we are wild and wooly. We had a teacher here last year who came out from the East for her health. I guess she imagined she was among savages, and so thought she ought to act accordin'! The first night she sat down to the table my mother introduced her all around and she never took her eyes off her plate or answered a word. As soon as she got through eatin' she made a dive for her room, which was at the farthest end of the house and stayed there.

"Us boys, when we found out how she felt about us and the cuntry in general, took out all the fire-arms on the place and began to act up to her ideas of the West. We howled and screeched, and fired enough shots to kill a regiment. The old man aidin' and a-bettin' us. Finally we stuffed a suit of clothes with straw and put an old black hat on it and stood it outside her room by a tree. The wind was blowin' hard, so it fell agin' her window, and she saw it.

"She thought it was somebody tryin' to get in and got out a revolver she had brought along for protection, I guess, and started to shoot it.

"If it had bee a man, he wouldn't have been in

ENTER WOMAN NUMBER ONE

much danger. She didn't even hit the window most of the time, but filled the whole side of the wall full of holes. My mother heard her shootin' and thought it was us boys. She woke my father and told him to go out and stop us, as she thought we was carryin' the joke too far. The girls who had the room next the teacher's woke up and began to call to her, and she was so excited that she turned the gun in their direction and commenced to shoot at them. Guess she'd be shootin' yet if she hadn't emptied her revolver and didn't know how to load it again."

"I should have thought she would have left next day?" observed Miss Little much amused.

"She didn't though. She stayed on, but still kept to her room most of the time and had nothin' to say at meals. She was a good teacher, though, and mighty interested in the kid," mused Blackie. "Guess she thought she was doin' missionary work for she started a Sunday school.

"One Saturday she asked my father for a horse. Said she wanted to go to Colwell's, as one of the children was sick. There wasn't any horse up that was gentle enough for her to drive, so my father told her to ride the pony we kept in the barn to get up the cows.

"She never rode before and didn't know how to guide a horse and that little bronc was just sharp enough to know it. We'd had him for years and when my youngest brother and sister was little we used to put one of them on his back with only a halter, and he would go out and drive up the milk cows, cuttin' them out from any others in the pasture. But it was too early to get the cows that day and as he wandered over the pasture he came upon a bunch of steers belongin' to the next ranch, that had broke through the fence, and started cuttin' them out."

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"What did he do with them when he had them separated from the rest?" inquired Miss Little.

"Oh, he'd cut one out and run it over in the pasture a little ways and then go back and get another one. When he had them all over there he'd cut them again one at a time and take them somewhere else."

"Why didn't she get off?" inquired Miss Little.

"I guess he kept movin' all the time and she was afraid to."

"Couldn't she stop him or anything?"

"She was too busy holdin' on, I suppose. Anyway, she didn't, and he kept workin' that bunch of steers over all afternoon until time to drive up the cows; then he cut them out of the bunch and brought them home. Her hair was flyin' in the breeze and she'd lost her hat and hairpins and was holdin' to the saddle horn for dear life when she rode up. She sure was a sight."

As he finished speaking he turned with a start and uttered a shrill whistle to the dogs and ejaculated: "There's a coyote!"

"Where?" excitedly asked Miss Little, hastily scanning the prairie.

"It's gone behind the hill, now," answered Blackie, and spurring his horse set him into a gallop, watching Miss Little the while to see if she was in danger of falling off.

"This isn't the first time you've been on a horse," observed he.

"Oh, no. I used to ride a lot when I was little, and I suppose one does not forget how. Why are the dogs scattering?" asked she.

"By Gee, they've found three coyotes," exclaimed Blackie. "They must have surprised them while they was feedin' on some dead animal. Yes, there is a dead cow and that old fox hound is trailin' one all by himself."

ENTER WOMAN NUMBER ONE

"The coyote does not seem to be much afraid of him. What makes him stop and look back? Is he waiting for the dog to catch up?" asked Miss Little.

"He knows the hound can't kill him by himself, and I guess he is puzzled over him yelpin' that way. All these other dogs run silently, and the coyote doesn't know what to make of it. Them other two coyotes ain't lossin' any time. Let's go faster and overtake them as they circle around the next hill. The dogs will just about catch 'em around there."

The horses needed little urging, seeming to enjoy the chase as much as the dogs. Miss Little's hair, which was hanging in a long braid down her back and twisted into a thick curl at the end, came loose and floated around her; and with her blue eye dancing with excitement and scarlet lips parted, she looked the embodied spirit of the wild, free life of the plains. As he galloped along beside her Blackie thrilled with the exultant joy of being alive, while a fierce desire for possession surged through him.

Upon reaching the brow of the hill a frightful tumult could be heard and the whole valley seemed to be covered with a whirling, seething mass of dogs snapping, growling and snarling, fighting in blind fury; the coyote limp and mangled, being torn to bits between them.

"There won't be much left of their hides," observed Blackie.

After watching them awhile they called the dogs, who reluctantly left their helpless prey, and rode on. They had ridden quite a ways when they heard an occasional faint yelp, and looking around in search of the cause, they descried in the distance two specks which appeared on the crest of a hill and then disappeared on the other side.

"That old fox hound is trailin' that coyote yet," ex-

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claimed Blackie. "And they both run like they was about played out. We'll take these dogs over and help him kill it." Calling them they spurred their horses and soon overtook the hound and made short work of its exhausted prey.

"Well, that's some coyote chase," remarked Blackie. "You have something to tell the next time you go back East and you needn't strain the truth either."

"Well, I should think so. I never was so excited in my life. I'd like to hunt coyotes all the time," remarked Miss Little.

"I don't think it is bad sport myself, when I've got good company," agreed Blackie, his pulses tingling from her bright glance and smile. "But, I believe, I like dancing better." And with a look in which tenderness gleamed he inquired: "How about the dance Saturday night?"

"I have promised to go with your brother," answered she.

"Damn him," muttered Blackie between his teeth.

"What did you say?" inquired she.

"Oh, nothing. I'll be 'round to take you for another hunt next Sunday, if you'd like to go?"

"Very well," assented she. And then noting his scowl she asked impudently:

"How did you get your name? I notice that most of the nicknames out here are quite appropriate, but I am puzzled to know whether yours is a compliment to your complexion or disposition."

"Well, I guess it fits both pretty well," answered he, with a short laugh. "But you see as all the other children had either red or very light hair, my black head was very conspicuous, and they jokingly called me 'The Black Sheep,' and soon that was shortened to Blackie and that name stuck. For a long time I forgot I had any other. One day a man stopped at the

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ranch and asked me what my name was and I studied for awhile and then said:

"Well, it ain't Blackie, but I don't know what it is."

"Do you know what it is now?" asked the girl laughing.

"Yes, I refresh my memory by goin' in and lookin' it up in the family bible, where mother has the birthdays written down. I was christened Samuel."

Matters went along in that way all winter. First one would take her to a dance or for a ride and then the other, and Miss Little played with them both with consummate skill. She had no one with whom she could exchange girlish confidences in the country, so she was wont to write voluminous letters to her bosom friend and chum in which she detailed the ins and outs of her love affair, which to girls seems to be an all-absorbing topic.

My dear Antoinette: Yes, I am still teaching in the country, and am not dead of ennui as you suggest. They say, "Life has its compensations" and I find it is true of the country, at any rate. Of course, it is disagreeable at times, and I hate children—the horrid grubby little things; and if it wasn't for my two handsome cowboys I suppose I should have given it up long ago. They are the compensations.

They both continue to be my most devoted slaves but Steve is not as abject as I should like. In fact, it puzzles me at times to determine whether his attentiveness springs from a desire to outdo his brother Blackie, or out of a sincere regard for myself. I can hear your exclamation of (I am surprised that her vanity will permit her to acknowledge

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so much). But you know a good general does not ignore the strength of the enemy.

Blackie and Steve are by far the most striking personalities among the cowboys. The latter is tall, straight, supple and well knit. Has broad shoulders, deep chest and the tapering hips and slender, elastic muscles of the athlete; with light, slightly waving hair and aquiline features. In addition he has a magnetic personality that draws people to him involuntarily. He is always in the limelight. If it is races, he has the fastest horse. If it is a bucking contest, he is the best rider—with Blackie always a close second, so they are both well calculated to catch and hold the feminine eye.

The former is more stockily built and, as his name implies, is dark. With straight, black hair like an Indian's, and a brooding, vengeful disposition. When I dance with some one else he stands in a corner and glowers furiously, and I can feel his eyes following me about.

I was much puzzled at the contrast between him and Steve, until I learned that they were not really brothers. It seems Blackie is an orphan, his parents having been victims of Indian massacre in the early days. He is only a month or two younger than Steve, and they were brought up as twins. But, alas, for the theories of those who believe that environment counts for more than heredity.

Here is a good example to the contrary. No amount of training or outside influence could make these two alike. Nature, the great sculptor, has moulded them of different clay. They have always been rivals in everything and it has had one good effect: they have each become very proficient in every way. This has been helped along by them having to run the ranch and look after the stock since they

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were mere boys, as their father became almost blind and the eldest brother died, so all the responsibility fell upon their shoulders.

It seems that Steve is the trader and business man, while Blackie looks after the ranch. So you see the situation and that I am likely to have a very exciting time before I am through.

A number of children out here are named "Steve," and now and then I hear of a race horse that is called "Little Steve," or "Big Steve." One day I asked him how that name happened to be so popular and he had the audacity to tell me:

"Oh, when anybody gets anything good out here they call it 'Steve.'" There speaks the ego. So you need not worry over my trifling with his young affections. I fancy a lesson in humility will do him good.

However, I am not so sure that I am going to be able to administer it. Blackie has long been at my feet and only needs a little encouragement to precipitate matters, but this I wish to avoid, as it is much more fun to keep them dangling. But if I do not bring Steve to subjection I shall consider my winter as wasted, and that I am becoming passé.

And now, my dear, enough of myself. I am dying to know how you are progressing in your love affairs; do be sure and give me a full account in your next letter, and answer soon.

Yours, as ever,

"JACKONETTE."

There was much speculation among the neighbors and cowboys as to which one Miss Little would eventually choose. There was also an undercurrent of resentment at the way she kept them guessing, and as people in the country have nothing to talk about, ex-

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cept their neighbors' affairs, this was sure to be expressed whenever the subject came up.

Sam Heiss, an old crony of Steve's, stopped at the Williams Ranch one day and as usual the conversation drifted to the Gardeau boys and their love affair, and the old lady Williams remarked with much rancor:

"Well, no matter how Blackie feels about it, it hasn't unbalanced Steve any. He may be in love, but he is just as sharp on a horse trade as ever."

"I guess it would take a good deal to spoil Steve for horse tradin'," remarked Sam. "He's a cowboy, broncho buster and a lover of a fast horse and generally has one. All these occupations he practices in their proper seasons. But first, last and all the time he's a horse trader."

"Yes, he sure skinned us good and proper," said Frank, who then gave the details of a trade which he made with Steve. Sam listened for awhile and then got on his horse and rode away, making a point to pass the Bar Gee Ranch, and if Steve was home get the other side of the story.

Steve was there and ready for a chat. After they had settled themselves comfortably on the sunny side of the barn Sam broached the subject thus:

"I was over at the Williams Ranch to-day and the whole family was roastin' you to a fare-you-well."

"What's the matter with them?" inquired Steve.

"They say you beat them out of a horse an' they are mighty sore about it. They'd take turns tellin' the story. One would talk till he played out an' then to'thern would chime in."

"What are they kickin' about? Has old High Ball died?" asked Steve.

"Is that the name of the horse you traded them? They didn't say anything about its dyin'."

"Well, then I don't see where they have any kick

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comin'. He's got four good legs anyhow, and the one I got in exchange is a cripple and will be as long as he lives."

"You don't say? What was your idea for tradin' for it?" inquired Sam much puzzled.

"I got it to sell to old man Dempsey that lives on the ranch below," answered Steve, chuckling at the remembrance.

"He just brought out a new wife a couple of weeks ago, didn't he?"

"Yes, and she is about twenty years younger than he is. How she ever happened to marry him is more than I know. Men must have been mighty scarce back where she came from."

"Where did he get her?"

"Back East somewhere, and it's sure the truth that love is blind. Since he got married old Dempsey is sure locoed, but I guess I helped his eyesight some. I think he can see plumb good out of one eye now. and the other'n' is improvin' fast since I sold him that horse."

"How much did you get for it?"

"One hundred and twenty-five dollars."

"Whew! I thought you said the horse is a cripple."

"He is and always will be."

"Well, then Dempsey sure must have gone blind, for he's quite a horse trader himself, ain't he?"

"Yes, he can trade horses all right. He trimmed me pretty neatly last spring and I've been layin' for him ever since."

"How did he happen to catch you? What was the matter with your eyesight. You hadn't met the school teacher then," said Sam, trying to draw Steve out on that subject.

"No," answered Steve. "And if I had it wouldn't have made any difference. That mare would have

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fooled anybody. All she needed was a good liar back of her."

"Well, I guess old man Dempsey can travel in that class any day, but he must have told some pretty stiff ones to take you in so completely."

"No, he didn't say so much. You see it was this way." And Sam, finding that he at last had Steve fairly launched on the subject, settled back comfortably and lit his pipe.

"One day early last summer as I was sharpin' the sickle to the mower, gettin' ready to start cuttin' alfalfa, the old man came up. It was right after he had bought that place and he was drivin' as pretty a team of light bay mares as I ever saw. Slick and fat and perfect beauties, weighin' about twelve hundred apiece. I looked them over and praised them up a bit and the old man said:

"'Yes, they are a mighty fine team, but a little too high-lived to trust with that green man I have workin' for me, so I guess I'll have to sell them as I'm gettin' too old to work much myself.'"

"Guess he sung a different tune when he was courtin' his wife," answered Sam.

"Yes, and he's been hangin' onto every bronc on the ranch ever since he came back and they drag him around all over the corral, but he'll keep a holdin' on and yellin' at 'em just as long as his wife is lookin' or can hear him."

"Looks like it would scare her."

"Humph, she encourages him in it, by praisin' his fine horsemanship. Guess she thinks some of them will kill him and she will get the ranch that much sooner. That must have been what caught her eye. It certainly couldn't have been him that attracted her. When he spoke about wantin' to sell the horses I looked them over closer. The old man sat and watched me

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and when I had finished he asked: 'What will you give for them.'

"I don't know, I answered. 'I don't need any more horses. Though I might trade you something for them, as I could use them for brood mares.'

"We dickered around all morning, but couldn't make a trade for the team, so finally he said:

"I'll trade you the mare on the off side for old Roney and twenty-five dollars to boot. I hate to sell one without the other, but I'll tell you the truth,' said he lookin' might honest. 'She's a little cold shouldered and I'm afraid that man that's workin' for me will ruin her.'"

"Thought he said they was too high-lived at first?" said Sam.

"Yes, he did and I might a-known there was something awful wrong with her if he'd admit that much. I did get a little suspicious, but finally agreed that if he'd leave her for me to try for a day and she worked all right I'd trade him Roney and give him fifteen dollars to boot. He tried awful hard to make a clean trade of it then and there, but I stuck out for a trial of the mare, and at last I guess he thought I was beginnin' to mistrust something, so he answered:

"All right I'll do it.' Then he unhitched her and put the harness on Roney, while I hitched her up to the mower.

"As he drove off he called out kind of carelesslike, as though he wasn't in any hurry. 'I'll be over in a couple of days to see how you like her.'

"Well, I worked her all the afternoon and she went along as steady and honest as an animal could. Went right up into the collar and pulled her share. I began to think I'd made a good trade. The next morning just as I hitched up and started to drive out to the field along came Dempsey. Said he had to go to Denver

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that day and if I was satisfied we'd close the deal as he liked Roney all right.

"I went into the house and brought him out fifteen dollars, and when I handed it to him he shoved it into his pocket and started off like he couldn't get away fast enough. Right then I said to myself: 'I'm stuck.' I don't know what made me think it, but he had a kind of sneakin' look in his eyes when I handed him the money and I asked him then: 'This deal is all square, is it? That man you bought these horses from hadn't stole them had he?'

"'Oh, no,' he answered. 'I got them from a man I have known all my life.'

"I went to work and I hadn't gone three rounds until the mare stopped."

"The old cuss," said Sam. "What did you do?"

"I sat there and looked at her for awhile and she turned her head and watched me out of the corner of her eye, to see how I was takin' it. I clucked to her and after hesitatin' for a moment she started up, but acted just like she had a notion not to do it.

"'That ain't so bad,' I thought, but on the next round she stopped again. I clucked to her and tapped her up with my whip, but it took her longer to make up her mind to start this time. Every time we reached that place she would stop. I'd get off and oil the machine and tinker around, tryin' to make myself believe I wasn't gettin' mad. She kept that up all afternoon, gettin' a little worse all the time. I tried all the ways I ever heard of for makin' a balky horse start, but none of them worked. Along about quittin' time she stopped for good. I unhitched the team and I couldn't even lead her toward the house. That sure made me mad and I picked up a club and went after her, and if she didn't dodge, and I nearly knocked the other horse down.

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"At last she started and I drove her as far as the corner of the yard fence and she balked again, so I simply tied her to the corner post and left her there. Thought I would leave her there all night, but before I went to bed I began to feel sorry and went out to get her—and do you think I could budge her? Not an inch, and there she stood all night keepin' everybody awake, stampin' her feet and rattlin' her harness. The next morning I drove her in, fed and watered her and hitched her up again. She never balked once all day and worked all right the next time. She just seemed to take it by spells.

"I worked and worried with her all the time I was mowin' the first cuttin' of alfalfa. Some days she'd work and some she wouldn't. Finally I tried driving her to a wagon. She didn't balk much on the road, but couldn't stand the trips and would get slower and slower, until she would play out completely."

"What did you do with her?" asked Sam.

"I turned her out in the pasture and I guess she must have got a nail in her foot somehow. I saw her one day limpin' around and I wouldn't even take the trouble to drive her in to find out what was the matter. I didn't go out to the pasture again for about a week and when I did her head was all drawn around to one side and I saw she had lock-jaw. I said: 'Good for you, old girl, I hope you die a good hard death.'"

"Did she die?"

"Yes, she died all right and I was glad of it."

"I don't blame you," answered Sam. "When a man gets a horse like that he ought to take it out and shoot it. What do you reckon was the matter with her?"

"I don't know. I believe she had been hurt, or there was something the matter with her head. I believe horses get crazy streaks same as people do.

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She'd balk anywhere, with an empty wagon goin' down hill, or when I was leadin' her down to get a drink, after workin' half a day. So there must have been something the matter with her besides onriness."

"I'll bet old Dempsey did some tall laughin'," observed Sam.

"If he did he never laughed where I could see him, and I guess it's my chance now."

"What color was the horse you sold him? I don't remember the Williams boys havin' a crippled horse."

"It's a light sorrel and as pretty as a picture and, like the balky mare, it is only crippled by spells, or when used for awhile. As long as it runs in the pasture it is all right and there ain't one mark on its ankle to show what causes it to go lame."

"I suppose he bought it for his wife to ride," laughed Sam.

"Yes, he wanted to give her a weddin' present of a saddle horse and didn't have anything fancy enough. The man that was workin' for him told me about it. Said the old man wanted something extra. That nothin' was too good for Mrs. Dempsey number two. Just as soon as I heard it I saddled up that gray horse I got from old man Milton, called High Ball, and rode over to see the Williams boys."

"I don't see how you ever managed to trade with them," observed Sam. "If a man takes them up on an offer they back out for fear they ain't askin' enough."

"Yes, I know that, so I hung around all morning and never mentioned horse trade. After awhile I led the conversation 'round to crippled horses and Philip said:

"'Steve, what do you suppose is the matter with that sorrel saddle horse of ours? He goes lame every time we use him a day or so.'

"'Why, ain't he well yet?' I asked as though sur-

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prised. I knew he was not and that was just the opening I was lookin' for.

"'No,' said Frank. 'He looks all right. His ankle ain't any bigger than the rest and any one that didn't know him would never think about his goin' lame.'

"'Why don't you sell him to some one? No use in your keeping him, if you can't use him.'

"'What would you give for him?' asked Philip.

"'I don't know,' I said, as though I wasn't much interested. 'Bring him up and let's have a look at him.' When they brought him up I looked him over and to all appearances there was not a thing the matter with him, but I told them I would not give much for him.'

"'Maybe you can cure him. You are pretty lucky that way. What would you give for him as he stands?' asked Philip.

"'Well, sir,' I said, as though just makin' up my mind. 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you this old gray horse I'm ridin' for the sorrel and you pay me ten dollars to boot.'

"'No, I can't do that,' said Frank, 'But I'll trade even.'

"I never said a word, but uncinched my saddle and flung it on the back of the sorrel, tightened up the cinch and rode off. You'd ought to have seen their faces. They began to look sick even then, although the horse I traded them was all right and they couldn't have sold the crippled one to anybody else for anything. Of course, High Ball is old, but he is just the thing for Frank who is afraid to ride a horse that will go out of a walk."

"Did he go lame on you goin' home?" asked Sam.

"I should say he did. By the time I got home he was travlin' on three legs. I had to get off and walk the last half mile. I let him rest a day or two and didn't say anything to the folks at home about him.

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Day before yesterday I was saddlin' my horse my little sister come out and asked: 'Where are you going? Can't I go along? I am just crazy to try that pretty horse you bought the other day.'

"'All right,' I answered. 'You can come, but it may not be a very long ride.'

"'Why, where are you going?'

"'Oh, I don't know yet, but you can come along and take your chances.' When she was ready we started out and went straight to old man Dempsey's. He was at home and his wife came out with him and wanted my sister to get off, but she answered: 'No, I'll come down some other time. I want to go with Steve to-day and ride this dandy horse. Isn't he a beauty?'

"'Yes,' answered Mrs. Dempsey. 'Is he gentle?'

"'He's as gentle as a lamb,' answered Phil.

"I kept still. I thought they were doin' pretty well without me, although my sister didn't know anything about what I was intending to do.

"Finally old man Dempsey became interested and remarked: 'I'm lookin' for a horse for my wife and if you want to sell him and your price is right maybe we can make a deal.'

"I told him that as I had only had him a few days I was in no hurry to sell him and that I might take him to town, as I knew a party who was lookin' for a showy horse and was willing to pay a good price. 'I wouldn't take less than one hundred and fifty dollars.'

"At that the old man fairly snorted, and said he could get a half a dozen horses for that as cheap as horses are now. I told him maybe he could, but not like that horse. Well, he hummed and hawed for a while, but his wife was dead stuck on the horse and kept sayin' that one hundred and fifty dollars wasn't much for

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a horse; that they cost a lot more than that back where she came from; so he finally said he'd give me one hundred dollars for him. I offered to split the difference and let him have it for one hundred and twenty-five dollars and when he took me up I said:

"'You've bought a horse. Get off Phil.'

"'All right,' answered old man Dempsey. 'Which would you rather have? Cash or a check?'

"I told him I would take cash. I didn't want a check as I was afraid he would stop payment on it.

"Him and his wife went for a ride that afternoon and the horse went along fine for awhile, as they traveled along slow, but as soon as the old man started to hit it up a little faster the horse began to go lame, and before they had gone a quarter of a mile he could hardly hobble along. Mrs. Dempsey had to get off and wait for the old man to go back to the house and hitch up to the buggy, as they did not have anything gentle enough for her to ride.

"The next day he came up just as mad as he could be. At last he cooled down and said: 'Well, I know I'm beat all right, but what is the matter with the horse?'

"I told him I didn't know. That it had been that way for a year or so and nobody can find out. The people I got him from took him to a good veterinary and he could not tell what was the trouble, and I said 'I guess this just about evens us up, don't it Dempsey?' He looked at me for a minute and turned and went home without sayin' a word.

"When Walter Milton heard about the deal he said he was goin' to get on his horse and ride right over and tell the Williams boys how much I got for the horse. He said they'd howl about it for the next ten years and from what you say I guess they will."

"Well, I don't see why they ought, they couldn't a-

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sold it to anyone else," said Sam. "But Mrs. Williams was right about one thing though."

"What was that?"

"She said your bein' in love hadn't dulled your wits any. That you was just as sharp as ever on a horse trade."

"How does she know I'm in love?" asked Steve.

"I guess she's judgin' by the symptoms. You and Blackie have been courtin' the teacher pretty vigorous all winter and everybody is wonderin' which is goin' to win."

"I suppose it does look as if we was both in love with her an' I guess there ain't much doubt about Blackie's feelin's. He's hardly spoken to me all winter, and is as sullen and as cross as a bear. But just between you and me I'm sure tryin' mighty hard to keep my head and if I'd thought she cared anything for Blackie I'd a-dropped out long ago, but shucks, she's just playin' with us both and only wants to hang our scalps to her belt. She's awful pretty and has soft, little coixin' ways that's sure hard to resist at times, but I've pulled through so far and I guess Blackie has a suspicion of how things are himself and is keepin' a tight grip on his tongue, if he can't control his heart."

"It's a pretty interistin' game, but you'd better drop out if you think she's got the cards stacked, because you are liable to get badly burnt if you keep on," advised Sam.

"Yes, that's so, but I'll play it to a finish now. It won't be long until school is out and that will end it. If I dropped out now it would look like I'd been sacked."

"Maybe you are right. But what if she applies for the school next year?" suggested Sam.

"That's so, she might. Well, if she does I'll give it to her. I wouldn't want her or the people to think I was doin' any spite work."

LOST IN A MARCH BLIZZARD

II

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Alas for the well-laid plans of mice and men. School was out the last of March and both Steve and Blackie sought the honor of taking Miss Little to the station, and she, thinking of the long drive, decided to go with Steve; as so far he had not proposed and she hoped to bring it about on this last trip together.

There was already a foot of snow on the ground and this had been alternately melted by the hot sun during the day and frozen by night until it was covered with a hard crust through which the horses broke continuously, so they could make but slow progress.

The sky and atmosphere were of the same cheerless gray color which looked as if it might thicken into a storm at any minute. When Steve reached the Colwell Ranch his sister came out and inquired:

"Are you going to attempt to take Miss Little to the station to-day? It looks like there is going to be a blizzard. You had better put it off until to-morrow."

"It is just as Miss Little says. I told her I would take her to-day and I am here to keep my promise, although I think it'd be much better if she would postpone her trip until next week, as the roads are already bad and if it should storm it might be pretty disagreeable."

"Mother will be so worried if I am not there when they go to meet me," quickly objected Miss Little in a solicitous voice. "I should not have written them when

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to expect me and then it would have been all right to wait over."

"It is too bad to disappoint her, but I believe she would be more worried if she knew you were out in such weather," suggested Mrs. Colwell.

"But she will not know about that and will only wonder why I have not come," said Miss Little, meeting all objections, and giving the impression of a dutiful daughter who would suffer any hardship rather than give her mother an anxious moment, while the truth was, she had planned to be one of a theatre party that night and her friend Antoinette and the original of one of the dozen photos Mrs. Colwell had commented upon were to be at the station to meet her. It was they and herself who would be disappointed and not her mother whom she had not taken the trouble to inform as the date of her arrival, but Miss Little was far too clever to let that appear.

"We had better decide at once what we are going to do," said Steve, putting an end to the discussion. "We will have to start right away if we are to get there in time for the train, as the roads are bad and we will have to drive slowly."

"Very well. I'll be ready in a moment," agreed Miss Little, hurrying away for her wraps.

Mrs. Colwell brought extra robes and hot bricks for their feet and saw to adjusting the hood of the buggy, so as to protect them from as much wind and cold as possible; Miss Little nervously protesting all the time for fear the delay would make them late for the train.

At last they were ready to start and set off on their slow toilsome journey of eighteen tortuous miles to the station. They had not gone far when fine star-like flakes of snow came gently drifting down, eddying about as they neared the earth, as if reluctant to alight; lulling all fears of the storm of which they were the

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forerunner by the quietness of their approach. Presently a bitter blast swept down from the north, striking the travelers full in the face and the horses paused for an instant and started to turn 'round.

"Are you going back?" inquired Miss Little, still apprehensive.

"No," shouted Steve hoarsely through the raging wind. "It is too late now. We'll have to keep on until we reach some house. Pull the robes over your head and do your best to keep up circulation in your hands and feet. We are in for a hard blizzard."

"Oh! I am so sorry I made you come," exclaimed Miss Little, the tears starting from her eyes and freezing before they fell.

"That's all right, little girl," said Steve, reassuringly. "Don't cry," and putting his arm around her he tenderly pulled her up close to him and put the robe over her head to shut out the stinging, biting cold. Miss Little nestled down close to him, grateful for the added warmth of his body which served to check the numbness that had been gradually creeping upon her. She could hear Steve beating his hands and felt the lurch of the buggy as it alternately broke through or rode on top of the crust as the horses stumbled and strained through the blinding snow. Suddenly the vehicle jerked downward with violent force and Miss Little slid off the seat to the bottom and almost went out over the wheel. Steve caught her with one hand and pulled back, saying:

"Hold on, we are in a gulch."

She climbed back into the seat again with an effort, and beheld the horses floundering and struggling for a foothold in the deep, powdery snow which the wind was momentarily piling higher and higher in the gulch. At a shout from Steve they lunged forward and struggled up the high bank. After that they drove on

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for what seemed hours to Miss Little, who had lost all count of time. At last she inquired, making herself heard with an effort:

"Do you think we are lost?"

"I don't know," answered Steve. "It is hard to keep the horses headed toward the wind, but if it hasn't changed I think we are going in the right direction, but we may pass a ranch and never know it."

At last the horses came to a halt and Steve started to get out, thrusting the lines into her numbed and stiffened hands.

"Where are we?" asked she, but the wind muffled her voice.

When the gate was opened the tired horses struggled through with small guidance from Miss Little and narrowly escaped hanging the wagon up on a post. Some range cattle and horses had drifted in from the prairie, seeking shelter from the storm. They had broken through the fence beyond the gate and stood shivering in the lea of the barn, and seeing them Miss Little breathed a sigh of relief at the thought that they had reached some ranch.

Steve led the horses up nearer the yard gate and, picking Miss Little up, wraps and all, carried her to the house, uncerimoniously opened the door, thrust her inside and stepped in himself. The startled occupant jumped up from where he was huddled over a small cook stove and regarded with widening eyes the two snow-covered beings which the storm had thrust upon him. Addressing him in Mexican, of which he knew a little, Steve made known their plight and with a few guttural words of understanding the man hastily put on his coat and went out to unhitch the horses.

Steve helped Miss Little take off her wraps, she being too numbed and exhausted to even inquire where they were. When the Mexican returned he shook the

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snow from the robes and comforts which he had brought in from the buggy and spreading them on the bed Steve induced Miss Little to lie down, while he made a hot drink for them both from the whisky the man produced. This put Miss Little to sleep and when she awoke a couple of hours later she sat up with a start.

"Where are we?" inquired she.

"We are at one of Mr. Rann's sheep camps. Don't you hear the sheep bleating?" asked Steve.

"Yes, that is what woke me. I dreamed I was in an orphan asylum which was full of little children and they were all crying at once."

"Well, no wonder you woke up then," laughed Steve. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty well. How long will we have to stay here?"

"I can't say. As soon as the storm quits I will try to drive to the Rann ranch, which ain't more than two miles from her. But it will not be safe to try it until it does."

"I have heard of the Ranns," said Miss Little. "They have been out here a long time, have they not?"

"Yes, I guess everybody knows of them. They are one of the oldest settlers."

"The old man used to be quite an Indian fighter, didn't he?"

"Yes," assented Steve. "He came out here when the Civil War was still only a possibility, and settled on Running Creek. The Indians caused him a good deal of trouble for awhile, burning his cabin once or twice, so one of his Mexican sheep herders advised him to build an Adobe house which would not burn, like they build in New Mexico and Old Mexico."

"What is an Adobe house?" inquired the girl.

"Adobe, or 'Dobie' as every one calls it is composed of a dark, heavy soil which when wet and packed hard

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and let dry is almost as hard as cement. The Mexicans and Indians of Old Mexico used to build houses of it and do yet, I guess. It lasts for years and houses of it are warm in winter and cool in summer. The old man liked the idea and, hiring a lot of Mexicans to mix the mud and make the blocks, he built a big fort-like house with walls about three feet thick. Through the middle he made a regular old-time fireplace, with hooks to hold the pots and kettles for cooking."

"How interesting. Did the Indians every try to burn it?" inquired Miss Little.

"Yes, but they soon found they could not do it, and when they went on the war path the settlers from all around used to come over to the Rann Ranch for protection. One night when they were all asleep and was not thinking of Indians, an enterprising young buck tried to get in and tomahawk them all by slidin' down the chimney into the fireplace. He got stuck when he was about half way down and couldn't go either way and made such a racket tryin' to get loose that they all woke up and when they found out what it was the old man built a fire and smoked him to death.

"The Indian hung there for two or three days before they could get him down. All the neighbors came to see and help get him out and did a lot of jokin' about the new kind of meat Rann had hangin' in his smoke-house."

"Oh, how horrible!" exclaimed Miss Little, shuddering.

"Lots of times the Indians used to come along and ask for something to eat. One day when an Indian came by and Mr. Rann was away Mrs. Rann went to bed and pretended to be sick. When the Indian came up she sent the oldest boy to the door to say

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'Squaw sick' thinking that would scare him away as most Indians are afraid of sickness, but I guess he must have been pretty hungry or a little suspicious, anyway he swung his tomahawk around like he was going to kill him and frightened the boy half to death."

"Wonder what was the reason he did not kill him?"

"It was old Collerah, chief of one of the tribes of the Utes, and as they were supposed to be friendly I guess he thought he had better not do it. But he kept ridin' 'round the house all day, lookin' in at the windows and scarin' Mrs. Rann and the children half out of their wits."

"How old is Mr. Rann now?" asked Miss Little.

"Somewhere between eighty and ninety, I guess. He is gettin' pretty feeble. Spends most of his time settin' in the corner dozin' by the fireplace. But he wakes up long enough to buy a section of land now and then. Last year he had a green man workin' for him and he told him to hitch up to the wagon and haul some posts out to where they was building fence. The man hitched up all right, but when he tried to turn around he cramped the wagon so that it almost turned over. It made the old man mad and he said:

"'You blankety, blank fool. I have twenty thousand acres in this ranch and if that ain't enough for you to turn around on I'll buy a few sections more. Get off that wagon.' And when the man climbed down old man Rann got up on the wagon and straightened out the team and turned it 'round."

"I am just crazy to see that old fireplace. How soon can we start?"

"I don't know. The storm does not seem to get any better. We will probably have to stay here all night, so you might as well make yourself comfortable. The Mexican will have supper ready soon."

"I will cook it myself. I am ravenously hungry and

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I could not eat anything that greasy looking man cooked," said Miss Little, getting up.

"Maybe he won't let you," said Steve. "Some of them are very grouchy."

But when the Mexican returned from looking after the sheep Miss Little smiled sweetly and searching her mind for the few words of Spanish, which she had stored up at such pains to both herself and teacher while in high school, said:

"Buonas noches, caballero. Tentimos molestarle."

At that the sheep-herder, who was young and handsome, made a sweeping bow and much to her surprise started off on a long string of Spanish, instead of the Mexican jargon, and about all she could understand was the word *Senorita*, which he repeated several times, but from the gestures he made she gathered that he and all he possessed were hers to command. So, with a tentative look to see how he was taking it, she started to cook supper with the Mexican her willing assistant.

Steve watched Miss Little as she busied herself among the pots and pans and daintily went about preparing supper and he would have been scarcely human if he had not had a vision of a home and this woman as its mistress. Wasn't she his by right, thought he fiercely. Hadn't he kept her from freezing by the warmth of his own body and hadn't he fought the elements for her sake all that long day, wresting her from the very teeth of death by his sure instincts? For it was that alone that had guided him, as the storm had obliterated all landmarks and the horses would long ago have been wandering in a circle if he had not forced them to face the whirling blizzard as it swirled down from the north.

Perhaps some such thought entered Miss Little's mind also, for she gave him a tender glance as they

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sat down to supper and if he had proposed that night while the Mexican was out caring for the sheep she would no doubt have accepted him. But she, divining what was coming, to hide her confusion inadvertently picked up an old paper which the Mexican had brought over wrapped around some groceries. In looking it over she came across a long account of the play she was to have attended that night, and she thoughtlessly said:

"Oh! I had forgotten all about going to the theatre to-night."

"So that was why you was so keen to get to the city to-day," said Steve, on the instant fiercely jealous. "I thought you was mighty anxious about your mother for a girl that is as light headed as you are. Mighty little you cared whether I froze to death or not, so long as you got to the train on time," exclaimed he angrily.

"Oh! How can you speak so. You know I never thought about there being a blizzard," objected she, bitterly regretting her carelessness in letting her true reason appear.

But the thought of the other fellow who was going to take her to the theatre banished all tenderer ideas from Steve's mind and, putting on his coat, he went out to help bed down the sheep for the night. When they were through he and the Mexican came in and getting a few comforts repaired to the hay loft for the night, and Miss Little did not get the proposal for which she had manoeuvred so long.

The storm was still raging the next morning and kept it up all day, so it was not possible to attempt driving to the Rann Ranch. Steve and Miss Little avoided speaking to each other as much as they could, until seeing that the Mexican seemed puzzled at their silence, they gradually became more sociable and before night Miss Little had coaxed Steve into good humor. How-

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ever, she knew that he still retained a secret resentment which he would be slow to forget.

The next day they were able to get over to the Rann Ranch, where they had to stay for two or three days before they could make the trip to Watkins where Miss Little was to take the train. When they at last reached the station and she was getting on the train Steve asked: "Well, when will I see you again?"

"Oh! I don't know," airily exclaimed she, half turning as she mounted the steps and glancing at him indifferently over her shoulder. "I am going to California with my mother in a week or so and we will not be back until the latter part of June."

"Are you sure it is your mother you are goin' with?" inquired Steve.

"Why of course," laughed she. "Who did you think it was?"

"O! I don't know. I can't help being suspicious when you mention your mother, somehow."

"Well, it is her this time." And then apropos of nothing, she remarked: "I promised Mrs. Evanston of Elizabeth that I would come out the Fourth of July and go with them to the picnic at the Alton Ranch."

"All right, I'll be there," said Steve. The conductor called all-aboard and Steve was left standing on the platform looking after the train.

A tall slender cowboy strolled up just then and seeing Steve watching the departing train and guessing the reason, drawled out:

"Hello! You look like you had lost something."

"No!" answered Steve, quickly recovering his wits. "I've just found something."

"What have you found?" inquired Fred.

"I've found out that a man can be as dry on a day in March as he can in the middle of June. Come on over to Mike's."

III

THE LAST GREAT HORSE ROUND-UP

It is a far cry from the crowded cities of the East to the boundless prairies of the West, but in spite of the distance the conditions in one place affect the other. The American people are speed mad, for which the size of our country is largely responsible. The distances are so great that we must have quick modes of transit if we hope to get anywhere or do anything in the short time allotted to us here on earth. Moses and the Children of Israel spent forty years wandering around in the Wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Some of our present day Marathon runners would make an endurance race of it and cover the distance in three or four days.

So in pursuance of this craze for speed a baker's dozen of men in a certain eastern city decided to install cable cars and do away with the old horse car. This was the first step and since then many have been taken. The slow, jerky cable was replaced by the swiftly gliding electric cars, and now even these are abandoned to the common herd. The rich have achieved exclusiveness and speed through the medium of the automobile, while a few adventurous spirits shake off the dust of earth and sail about in airships, but none of these later changes have had the far-reaching affect on the West as did the abandoning of the horse car.

Up till that time the horse had been King of the

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Plains. In fact he continued to be king for a number of years after, but with this difference his crown had no value. However, I fancy, that never did a king yield up his prestige more gladly, for it meant being shipped East in vast hordes to satisfy the rapacious monster which had yearly devoured them by thousands, breaking their spirits and crushing out their lives, following the same weary, toilsome trail up and down the narrow streets, day in and day out, as long as breath remained in their body. No change, no variety, only the same monotonous grind. The little bell jingling and the old car bumping along behind.

But with the passing of the horse car all this ended. Instead they were left on the plains to gambol in happy freedom and increase prodigiously. Year after year their number multiplied until, as one old timer put it, "The plains were lousey with horses." They grazed in droves, here, there and everywhere.

If one bunch became startled and commenced to run another herd, seeing them, would toss their heads and start off, kicking up a cloud of dust. This would frighten another lot and they would communicate their excitement to those farther off, and so on all over the prairie. Horses would be running in every direction.

Prices went lower and lower and that of cattle went higher and higher until they had usurped the position that the horse once held, and the cry went out all over the land:

"Away with the horse! He is eating up the range from the cattle. *Le roi est mort! Vive le roi!*" So in the very heart of his empire and in one of his greatest strong-holds his downfall was planned.

Now most of the ranchers ran both horses and cattle, but the old "B" Ranch, about fifty miles East of Denver, on Kiowa Creek, was devoted exclusively to horses, and it was here that a number of ranchers met

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one day in mid-winter and planned that, with the opening of spring, there should be one general round-up and each man should collect his horses and sell them to make room for the cattle. This decision reached, the men departed, spreading the tidings over a radius of about a hundred miles.

About the first of April, as soon as the snow went off and green grass appeared, the round-up started. One morning, while it still lacked an hour or two of daylight, Steve, Blackie and Ira, who were to represent the "—G" Ranch, saddled their horses, gathered the twenty-five or thirty head that were to furnish them with mounts during the round-up and, herding them before them, set out.

Each was dressed in the regulation cowboy costume of leather chaps, boots, spurs, flannel shirt and grey Stetson hats, with the inevitable scarf around their necks, while tied behind their saddles were the indispensable yellow slickers. One horse carried their beds, which were done up in a compact roll and each composed of two or three pairs of blankets and a tarpaulin.

"Which way are we headed?" inquired Ira, who had just arrived as they were starting and had not heard any of their plans.

"We are goin' to the Alton Ranch, about twelve miles southeast of here and start with them, as they are sendin' out a mess wagon."

"I've heard of them," stated Ira. "They're newcomers out here, ain't they?"

"Yes, they've only been out here a few years. They had a ranch down by Colorado Springs before, but they are mighty fine people. Everybody likes them."

"I wonder if they will take old what-you-may-call-it-in-there with them on the round-up?" inquired Blackie.

"Who's that?" asked Ira.

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"He's a man workin' for the Alton's," said Steve. "And every time he gets a little excited or embarrassed he says 'what-you-may-call-it-in-there.' He mixes it up in his talk so much that everybody calls him by it."

"What's his right name?" inquired Ira.

"Flint, and he's a good man, when there ain't anything to drink handy," answered Steve. "But when he gets about half full he goes plumb crazy, and always wants to whip somebody."

"Well, I'd think he'd get plenty to accomodate him," said Ira, laughing.

"Oh! everybody knows he's a little rattle headed and don't pay any attention to him," said Steve. "He always picks a time when he has some friend handy that he thinks will help him out if he get's more than he can handle and if someone just catches hold of him and tries to keep him from fightin' he'll tug and pull, beggin' them to let him go so he can fight. One time he got in trouble with some fellow and another man was holdin' him and he was beggin' them to let him go and I came up. I told them to let him go, that the other fellow was about his size. But I told him, 'I ain't goin' to help you Flint if he's too much for you.' At that Flint began to cool off and when they let go and the other fellow made a pass at him Flint fell over before he was hit and began to hollar enough."

"Is that the Alton Ranch ahead of us?" inquired Ira as Steve finished speaking.

"Yes," answered Blackie. "And they are all ready to start."

Ira upon looking more closely said with surprise: "Ain't that a woman on one of the horses?"

"Yes," said Steve. "That's Marcia."

"What's she doing along? Does she go on the round-up?"

"She sure does," said Steve. "She and Ned are

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one and inseparable, as it says in the Constitution. Wherever you see one there you will find the other. If Ned is on the round-up she rides beside him, and if he's breakin' horses Marcia has one end of the rope twisted round a snubbin' post holdin' on. Ned says she wears out as many pairs of ridin' boots and Stetson hats as he does, and uses up as many saddle horses. She wears a short corduroy skirt most of the time, but if the work gets too strenuous, or the bronc she is ridin' too lively, she puts on a pair of corduroy pants and goes ahead. She's sure all right," said Steve.

"I thought some one said she was an Eastern woman and an artist," said Ira.

"She was," agreed Steve, "and has the house full of pictures she painted and, accordin' to them that know, they are all right. I don't know anything about art myself, but they look good to me."

"How did she ever happen to drift so far off her natural range?"

"I think her mother and Mrs. Alton were old friends and Marcia wanted to see the West before goin' to Europe to study art, so came out on a visit and that ended the artistic career. Instead of paintin' life she began to live it. She had a mighty fine complexion when she came out, but now she is tanned as brown as an Indian, but that doesn't bother her a bit."

Just then Marcia came dashing up and called out in a ringing tone.

"Hello there Steve! How are you Blackie?" And upon being introduced to Ira slipped off her thick buckskin glove and presented a long slender hand in greeting.

"Hello!" shouted Flint coming up. "What-you-may-call-it-in-there, put your string of horses in the west corral. I'm goin' to be the wrangler."

"Well, I don't know anybody better suited for the

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job," said Steve, laughing. But the double meaning of the word was lost on Flint, who could barely read and write.

"Marcia whirled her horse and went off to help Ned, who was trying to hitch up two snaky little mules to the chuck wagon.

"I thought you said Mrs. Alton did not take any care of her skin," said Ira. "Her hand was as soft and white as any one's I ever saw."

"I was speakin' about her complexion. She takes good care of her hands," said Steve with a reminiscent chuckle. "If they haven't got a cook Ned has to do it. She wears thick buckskin gloves all the time and won't go near the stove. One time when I was over there we was all playin' cards and Marcia smelled the roast burnin'. She called to Ned, 'Say, Ned, don't you think that roast is cookin' too much.' And he answered, 'Maybe it is, Marcia, you'd better look at it.' 'Indeed, I'll not look at it and burn my hands all up,' answered she indignantly. That afternoon we was all out pitchin' horse-shoes and Marcia's mother, who was visiting them, came in and said: 'Haven't you all washed the dishes yet? Well, I'll do them for you.' 'Don't you do it,' said Marcia. 'First thing you know Ned won't even cook dinner.'"

"Them's rather dangerous sentiments, ain't they?" inquired Ira, laughing. "All the other women are apt to pattern after her."

"Oh! most of them have several children and are too busy, but they all envy Marcia. She does as much work outside as Ned does and they are together all the time. I don't know any other couple that is as happy as they are, so it seems to be a pretty good plan."

Soon all was in readiness and they started out. Marcia on horseback and Ned, accompanied by Balle-

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han, the cook, driving the chuck wagon. Steve, Ira, Blackie and Flint driving the herd of fifty or sixty head of horses that were to furnish mounts for them on the round-up, each one having from eight to ten horses apiece. Even then they might have to send back for more in case of accident or some of their horses playing out.

Steve rode up alongside of the wagon and seeing Ballehan, said:

"Hello, Ballehan. What are you doin' here?"

"I'se goin' to cook for de outfit," said Ballehan.

"Well, then I'm sure we will be well fed," answered Steve and, turning to Ned, he inquired: "Where are we goin' to camp?"

"I guess we will stop over on Wolfe Creek about ten miles from here. That's where the fellows who are goin' to eat with us are cuttin' out to-day."

"Where did they get the coon?" asked Ira as Steve rode back.

"Oh, that's Ballehan. He has a ranch of his own over here. He came out her several years ago as cook for some outfit and saved up his money until he got enough to start up for himself. He has quite a bunch of horses and cattle now, but he still likes to go out as cook on a round-up. He keeps a bunk house where anybody that comes along is welcome to stay. Has it specially for that purpose. We'll probably hit their place about noon some day and get dinner. His wife is quite a character, but a regular old Southern cook, so I always stop when I'm anyways near there."

The place Ned had selected was an ideal one for a camp there being an abundance of wood and water, with plenty of grass for the saddle horses. While Ballehan was getting dinner the saddle band was bunched and thrown into a quickly constructed corral made by attaching an end of a rope to the mess wagon

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and passing to two or three cowboys on foot, who held it so as to form a circle.

Each man soon roped the horse he wanted to ride with more or less dexterity and then began the fun. Every one always took their toughest horses on the round-up and this meant that many of them, although it might have been several years since they were first ridden, still retained their youthful propensity to buck when freshly saddled. So there was always an element of excitement and uncertainty in changing horses, and the spectacle never seemed to grow old. Each unruly mount was greeted with a chorus of delighted laughter from the cowboys, and their riders did not seem to be much disconcerted and no matter how vicious or unmanageable his horse each man was supposed to be mounted and ready to start with the rest.

Steve had selected for his string of horses those which he knew to be possessed of the greatest endurance, paying no attention to the fact that many of them disliked a saddle so much that they tried to take it off at every opportunity. This first day, when he was ready, he made a quick spring into the saddle, without even so much as touching the stirrup and at the same instant his horse bumped his back and started to buck, jumping about four feet from the ground. From the first jump it could be seen that he was a past master at the art. Instinctively finding the stirrups with his feet Steve's lithe body swayed with the motions of the horse and the laughing cowboys shouted pertinent instructions such as: "Fan him with your hat! Stay with him Steve! Get onto the curves!"

Blackie, who could not bear to see Steve attracting so much attention and wishing to divert some of it to himself gave a quick jerk on his bridle reins, then suddenly loosened them, and as if obeying a signal, his horse ducked his head, reared and with arched back

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landed stiff legged far to one side. Digging in his spurs and waving his hat Blackie urged him to greater effort, seeming to take a fierce delight in each fresh contortion, until the frenzied horse reared on his hind legs and threw himself over backwards, pinning Blackie beneath him. On the instant he was up and Blackie made a quick jump, but his spur was caught in the cinch and there he hung suspended. As the horse bounded off across the prairie he whirled himself over and thrust down his hands, keeping his hand from bumping the ground.

The now sobered cowboys started in pursuit and Steve, riding up, tried to catch the dangling rein; the horse dodged and circling around ran toward Marcia. She, coolly whirled her rope aloft for a moment, then threw it with nice precision, and the wide loop settled around the neck of the runaway, choking him into submission.

Blackie kicked his feet free of the cinch and got up all intact, except for a few cactus needles in his hands and his leg slightly bruised where the horse fell on him. After this the cowboys separated, each going in the direction he had selected to cover that afternoon.

Before the sun went down the riders began to arrive singly or in pairs, suddenly appearing on the crest of the ridge, or picking their way across the bed of the creek, trying to avoid the treacherous quicksands which often gave way beneath them, causing their horses to plunge and scramble to keep from being sucked down and hopelessly mired.

Each one brought in a number of horses, which were bunched and herded out on the plains by a couple of cowboys. After supper Ned and Marcia busied themselves erecting a small tent off to one side behind a clump of trees, which was the only concession made to Marcia's sex. In all else she took the

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place of a man, going always with Ned and could ride and rope with the best of them.

Horses had been so cheap for several years that many people had not taken the trouble to brand the colts, unless there should chance to be an exceptionally fine one, so that in every bunch of horses found, there would be a number of "Slicks," as they called the unbranded horses.

One night after they had been riding for a couple of weeks, the tired men rode into camp, pulled the saddles from the hot and steaming backs of their weary horses and turned them over to the night herder. Throwing themselves on the ground around the camp-fire they began rummaging through their pockets for chewing tobacco, or cigarette papers, as the case might be. There were some fifteen or twenty of them lounging around in different postures of ease. After awhile, Ira, who was smoking a cigarette, took it out of his mouth, blew a few rings of smoke toward the sky, watched them dwindle and vanish into nothingness, and then put a sort of general query to the crowd.

"What are you folks goin' to do with the 'Slicks'?"

"Blessed if I know," answered Ned. "Guess whoever wants 'em can have 'em. Nobody has any special claim to 'em, although they might belong to any of us, as no one has branded for several years."

"Why not play poker for them?" inquired Blackie.

"Say, Blackie!" said Ed Knox. "You've got a head on you like a tack. We'll just do that. Has anybody got a deck of cards handy?"

Several greasy and much-thumbed packs were produced, but just then supper was announced, so the game was postponed until after they had eaten. When they were through, Steve said:

"I'm going to hunt up a lantern. I want to get a

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good look at my cards. I see a chance to go in the horse business right now."

They spread down a horse blanket, put the lantern in the middle, and seated themselves around it. Steve, Ned, Ira, Fred Knox and two cowboys riding for the Lazy Y outfit, were in one group, while Blackie and Flint joined the other group playing nearby. Marcia who hated cards, was seated behind Ned looking on.

"How'll we play?" inquired Ira.

"Let's put up a horse for each man and use matches for chips," suggested Steve, and this plan was adopted, each man taking ten matches. They played along for awhile, laughing and joking as befitted friends, when suddenly their game was interrupted by loud talking from the other group, and looking around they saw Blackie drawing his gun on Flint.

"What's the trouble between you two?" inquired Steve. "Put up that gun Blackie."

"You go to hell," answered Blackie. "That damned coward says I cheated, and he's got to prove it or eat his words."

"What-you-may-call-it-in-there," stuttered Flint. "Blackie throwed down four aces in takin' a trick, and I had one."

"Well, where did you get yours?" sneered Blackie.

"Let's see the deck," said Steve. But as Blackie had caught his foot on the blanket when he jumped up after drawing his gun on Flint the cards were scattered in every direction. They all helped pick them up, but search as they would the extra ace could not be found and Blackie again drawing his gun on Flint said:

"Now you damned liar, eat them words."

"Hold on," said Steve. "We don't know that he lied. We don't know it I say," looking at Blackie meaningly. "So you had better drop that gun until we do."

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Blackie glared at Steve with baffled hate and fury in his look, but dropped his gun back into his belt and walked off. After that they played every evening, and had no more difficulty. Steve had a run of luck, and received much chaffing about his collection of horses.

One morning Ned asked: "What's the matter with your string Steve? They seem all played out. Thought you said you brought a good bunch of horses with you."

"I did," answered Steve. "I'm doin' some ridin'. Whenever I see a man quit a snaky bunch of horses he is tryin' to drive up, I go after 'em. I want to get every one of our horses this year, and the more that are brought in the more of ours will show up."

"I wondered how it was you brought in such big bunches every day."

"Well, that's the reason, and I'm ridin' hard to get them."

"Well, a man with as many horses as you have ought not to be a-foot. Why don't you break a few of your slicks?" inquired Ned suggestively, with a wink at Ira.

"All right, I believe I will," assented Steve.

"When are you goin' to do it? Will you let me pick the horse?"

"Sure, go ahead. I'll ride it to-night when I get back."

"Which way are you goin' to-day?" inquired Marcia.

"Think I'll go over by Ballehan's."

"So are we," said Ned. "Let's meet there for dinner."

"Yes, do," said Marcia. "I just love to get Mandy started telling how she and Louis got married."

When noon came, Steve, Ned and Marcia rode up, and while they were putting the horses they had gath-

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ered in the corral, Ballehan's wife came running out and exclaimed:

"Fo' de Lawd's sake! If dere ain't Mr. Alton and Mrs. Alton and Mr. Steve. Come right in, while ah gets you-all some dinnah."

"Don't put yourself to any trouble, Mandy," said Marcia.

"Dat's all right. Dat's all right, honey," said Mandy, bustling about. "Dis old niggah ain' goin' to hurt herself." But presently when Marcia came in from helping Ned and Steve water the horses, she found Mandy beating and stirring vigorously.

"What are you making, Mandy?" inquired Marcia.

"Ise makin' some of dat dere may-yondays (Mayonnaise) dressin', Mrs. Alton, for dis yere lettuce. Do you like may-yondays dressin'?"

"Yes, I like it pretty well," said Marcia.

"Well, seh, ain' dat funny? Mos' ingeniously, everybody likes may-yondays dressin'. Ebber where ah ebber worked dey liked hit."

"Where did you used to live?" asked Marcia.

"I'se done come from Georgia, Mrs. Alton."

"That is a long way from here, Mandy. How did you ever happen to get so far from home?" inquired Marcia, wishing to draw her out.

"Yassum. dat's quaita a ways from heyh. But ah done comed out heyh fo' mah health," said Mandy, proudly. "Yassum, ah done got dat sumption, and de peoples dat ah wucked for done bought me a ticket an' sent me out heyh to Denvah. Bimby ole Mars Anderson, what runs de hotel in Kiowa, comded to Denvah lookin' fo' a cook and ah got de job.

"One day, when ah's hahed at wuck in de kitchen a niggah stuck his haid in at de do' an' hollered out: 'Whah's Mars Anderson?' Ah declare fo goodness, ah's so 'sprised ah neahly fell ovah. Dat was de fust

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culluhd pussen ah'd done seen since ah'd left Denvah; an' my, but wasn't he some scrum'tous lookin', humm! yuum!" said Mandy, reminicently. "Had a yaller handkercher 'round his naik, dem luther chaps on his laigs, an' a great big pistol stropped 'round his waist. I'se done been 'gaged to a niggah down South, but shucks, honey, dem odder niggahs nevah looked good to me no mo'. But ah nevah let on to dat niggah. No, seh. Ah just put on mah dignaty an' says:

"'Wah fo' you-all yelling so niggah? I'se ain' deef. Who you-all t'ink ah is, nohow?"

"'Ah tink you'se a servent same as ah is,' said he mighty sassy. 'What you-all tink you is, a lady?'

"'Don' you git sassy, niggah. I'se ain' afraid of you. Ah's seen dem guns befo'.'

"'Wid dat he jerked out dat gun and pinte hit at me, an' ah let out a screech an' fell ovah backwards. Yassum, an' dat niggah picked me up an' gib me a great big smack right squah on de mouf. Ah done pretend to faint some mo' den, an' he kept a kissin' ob me, an' ah kept a screechin' an' a faintin', until bimby ole Mars Anderson stuck his haid in at de do', an' said:

"'Heyh, you niggah. Let go mah cook. Ah done thot when ah got a culluhd cook ah cood keep her fo' awhile. Ebber white one ah done gets out heyh done mahries inside ob two weeks. Whah did you-all come from niggah?' aixed Mars Anderson, mighty mad.

"'I'se wukin' fo' de Cross Bah Cross outfit,' said Ballehan mighty scaid.

"'Well, you stay out ob dis kitchen,' said Mars Anderson.

"'But shucks, honey, all dat obbositionen just made dat niggah dat much wuss. He went out an' bimby ah's done hear sompin' tappin' on de windo' an' when

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ah looked aroun' dat niggah was standin' dah becknin' fo' me to come out do's. Wehn ah went out he said: 'Come on, Mandy, let's get mahed. I'se done got de liscense, and de jedge am home.'

"'Why fo' you-all in such a hurry, niggah,' sez ah, pretendin' I'se mighty skittinish. 'Ah's got to put on mah new red dress.' Yassum, dat dress was some scrum'tous. Was all trimmed up wid blue and yaller beads. But what a old fool dis niggah is. I'se done talked and let de biscuits bun.

"'You-all draw up yo' cheers now. Ah ain' got nothin' fit to eat hardly,'" said Mandy depreciatingly, although she had loaded the table with all kinds of jellies and preserves, which she had put up out of wild fruits.

"'Whyfo' didn' you-all let me know when you-all was comin' an' ah'd had a cake made and killed a chicken.'"

"'We couldn't, Mandy,'" answered Ned. "'But you have a-plenty. If we had this much everyday, we would get so fat and lazy we wouldn't want to work.'"

"'Don' dat niggah feed you-all good?'" inquired Mandy, indignantly. "'Ah'l lambast him good when he gets home.'"

"'Oh, it ain't his fault, Mandy,'" answered Steve, laughing. "'He don't have all these nice things to cook, you know. And all this jelly and preserves.'"

"'Well, you-all just let me know if he don' gib you-all plenty to eat.'"

When they reached camp that night, in spite of their being tired from the hard day's ride, Steve and Ned after throwing the horses they had gathered that day, in the general herd, rode among them to pick out a horse for Steve to ride.

Ned looked closely, trying to find one among Steve's slicks that showed special evidence of being a good

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bucker, and finally throwing his rope, caught a snaky looking light gray, which immediately ran back the full length of the rope. Ned's horse braced his feet, the other pulled back, and began to emit a choking, wheezing sound, as the tightened rope shut off his wind. Steve cautiously walked up, carrying his saddle, and as he was about to put it on the horse began to kick and lunge, striking out with his fore feet. At this several of the cowboys ran up to assist them. One caught hold of the horse's ear and twisted it, while another slipped a rope halter over its head, and blindfolded its eyes.

At this the horse stood quiet for awhile, in apparent subjection, then quickly gathering itself together, as it felt the cinch tighten, it sprang up, shaking its head, and with a lunge fell prostrate on the ground. Steve finished buckling the cinch, and then tying the loose end of the rope halter to the other side of the nose-piece to act as reins, he attempted to make the horse get on his feet, but he had become sullen, and only rolled over on his stomach. Steve seated himself in the saddle, and when the horse felt his weight, he arose with a bound, scattering cowboys in every direction. He reared to his hind feet and stood poised for a moment, as if undecided whether to go backward or forward, and at last decided to do neither, but with a quick turn in the air, landed with his head pointing in the direction his tail had been but a second before. This he repeated several times, bawling at every turn and landing with humped back and rigid legs.

"He's a pin-wheeler," observed Fred Knox. "But old Steve is stayin' with him."

"The horse whirled around and around, Steve all the while fanning him with his hat, and at last deciding that he could not throw him that way, gave it up and ran off across the prairie. Then others decided they



Steve seated himself in the saddle, and when the horse felt his weight, he arose with a bound.

Chap. III.

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would break some of their horses, and as the evening twilight stole on, such a broncho-busting contest was enacted as no city audience ever saw. There was no unaccustomed sights or sounds to puzzle or distract their attention. The only unusual thing was those whooping, howling savages, that stuck like a burr to their backs. Only now and then one would be dislodged, and the triumphant horse would gallop off to a brief enjoyment of his hard-earned freedom. Some horseman would ride out and after a long chase drive him back to camp, where he would be again roped and with great difficulty relieved of the troublesome saddle.

Ira, who was a fine rider, went up to one of the boys who had been thrown and said:

"Come here, I want to show you where you made your mistake. You see the horse bucked straight ahead until he got right about here, and then he changed his mind and decided to go in the opposite direction, and you went on. That's where you made your mistake. You'd ought to have changed your mind when the horse did."

"That's so," answered the fellow, laughing.

The next morning dawned grey and foggy, and along about noon it seemed that the clouds opened and the rain came down in torrents. Many of the cowboys rode into camp during the drenching downpour. After the rain ceased, the sun came out, and they saw that the Bijou, upon which they were camped, was full of water. Like its fellows for most of the year it was a dry bed of sand, with perhaps a narrow thread of water creeping along its length, except as happened to-day, there came a sudden heavy shower, or a cloudburst up stream. Then a wall of water would come rushing down, filling its banks, and overflowing the meadows along its course, until the dropping bows of

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the willows and grasses would be immersed in its turbulent waters.

Blackie noting its overflowing banks, remarked: "I believe I'll take my annual bath."

"That's a right good idea," drawled Fred Knox. "Guess I will, too. We'll have plenty of time before Ned and Marcia get back, even if they come. They said they might go to the ranch while they were over in that direction."

The rest of the cowboys were quick to follow suit, and stripping off their wet clothes, hung them on the branches of the willows to be dried by the sun and wind. They splashed about for awhile in the swiftly moving stream, until Steve glancing out across the prairie, saw two riders appear in the distance. Upon looking closely he decided that it was Ned and Marcia, so he quietly waded out among the trees, collected his clothing and dressed. Then gathering the clothing of the rest, and mounting a horse that was standing nearby, he shouted:

"There comes Ned and Marcia," and galloped off with their clothes.

The cowboys that were sitting on the bank basking in the warm sun, scrambled back into the water, and sat down, imploring Steve to bring back their clothes. At last relenting, he threw them down and rode out to halt Ned and Marcia until the rest were again fit to appear in civilized society. When he reached them, Marcia said:

"Here, Steve, is a chance for you. I've just received a letter from a girl friend of mine and she says she is coming out to visit me."

"When is she coming?" inquired Steve, much interested.

"About the middle of June. Here's her letter. I'll read it to you."

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My dear Marcia: As I was taking a walk through Central Park this morning, I saw a policeman belonging to the Mounted Squad standing beside his horse, which was a light, sorrel thoroughbred, and my desire to mount it and go for a ride was so great that I could hardly pass. The horse seemed to understand my longing for he started to walk out to me.

This incident made me remember your oft-repeated invitation to visit you on your ranch, so if it is convenient to you, I believe I will take advantage of it and come and see you this summer.

I am all run down from too close application to my work, and the doctor has advised me to take a rest, hence my walk in the park this morning.

My aunt from Boston will visit mother and take care of her for the summer. So I am able for the first time to follow my own sweet will and answer the call of my spirit, which I had been free to indulge it, would long ago have lured me to Colorado. For to me it has always been the land of romance, with its gold and wild, free life.

I could come about the middle of June if it would suit you. Be sure and have plenty of handsome cowboys on tap, as I am tired of the kind of men produced by the effete East.

Anxiously awaiting your reply, I am, as ever,
Yours lovingly,

ELOISE.

When she had finished, Steve said musingly: "So the West has been calling her, has it? What is her work she speaks about?"

"She is an illustrator," said Marcia. "She and I went to art school together."

As they were nearing camp it began to rain in a slow, dreary drizzle, and when supper was over, the cowboys, removing their boots, crawled between their

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blankets in their wet and soggy clothes. Steve and Ira, who were bunking together, in the dark, had accidentally made their beds in a little hollow, which as the rain increased, soon collected enough water to run over their tarpaulin. They both slept on for awhile, but as the water flowed in their bed, Ira began to dream that they were on a raft floating in mid-ocean, and the raft struck a rock. At this he awoke, and heard the thunder rumbling in the distance, and saw an old tree which had been struck by lightning commence to burn. Steve awoke also, and finding their bedding was hopelessly wet, inquired:

"What are we going to do now?"

"Maybe we can crawl in with some of the others," suggested Ira, and this he proceeded to do.

But as Steve went about from one group to another, they all seemed to be rolled up tight in their blankets, so he could not get in with them. Finally he found several fellows that had put their bedding together, and tried to crawl in beside them, but as there was not room he lifted the covers, climbed in on top, and slept there all night. The cowboys underneath him, squirming and groaning, but kept in place by the others closely wedged alongside of them.

At last they had rounded up all the horses on their allotted sweep of range. Each day as they gathered they would throw the horses in one herd, and when it became too large and unwieldly they drove them to some corral and worked them over, turning loose on the range again those belonging to some rancher who did not wish to sell. The rest would be cut out, and each bunch sent home in care of two or three cowboys.

It had been previously decided that all the horses that were collected near the "B" Ranch, that is within a radius of forty or fifty miles, should be driven there

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and worked over in their immense corrals which covered an area of fifteen or twenty acres. So early one morning, the latter part of May, the Altons' mess wagon set out followed by the cowboys belonging to their outfit who, shouting and galloping, herded before them the many hundred head of horses.

Many similar outfits had been working on different parts of the range, and all were to meet at the "B" Ranch on a specified date.

It was an unusually hot day for the time of year, and the merciless rays of the sun beat down upon the prairie, making the air vibrate with waves of heat, which danced before the tired eyes of the weary cowboys. All about, hanging cloudwise around them, were myriads of tiny gnats. These settled greedily upon their heads and shoulders, biting and stinging, and in the windless heat could not be eluded.

Now and then a cloud passing over the sun would throw a grateful shadow across their path, or a cool breeze would blow for a time and carry away the tiny pests that hovered over them, only to die down and expose them again to the torture of heat and pests. But short though the respites, they enabled the horses as well as the men to better endure the trip and bear the parching thirst that all the while consumed them.

Only once during the morning had they come across a little pool, shimmering in the bright sunlight. The thirsty horses rushed upon it, the leaders pausing an instant to take a quick mouthful of the tender grass about its edge, waded in, and crowding and trampling, churned its clear depth into yellow mud before any could quench their thirst.

At noon they made camp on a dry sandy gulch, where they found enough water for cooking purposes and saddle horses by digging a few feet below the bed, but

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there was not enough for the herd. This did not occasion the cowboys much worry as they supposed they could water them when they reached the "B" Ranch sometime in the middle of the afternoon.

Now when they had planned to gather all the horses in that vicinity in one general round-up and then work them over, no one had any idea what a vast undertaking it was going to be. Everybody knew there were lots of horses, but no one dreamed that any locality would yield the numbers that began to pour into the "B" Ranch from every direction.

Soon all the corrals were comfortably full, and still they came. Then they became packed with horses, kicking, squealing and neighing. Mares became separated from their colts, never to find them again, and the latter perished by hundreds and nobody cared.

It was impossible to water them at first, and they were too much excited to drink even if it were, so, consequently, numbers got lockjaw, and others were trampled under foot. They were crowded so closely in the corrals that no one could get among them to cut them out, so at last they decided to drive them out on the prairie and work them over out there.

Did you ever watch a colony of ants working? At first glance they seem to be running about with no reason or order in their labor, and to the uninitiated the round-up presented much the same appearance. Horsemen rode around among the corrals, seemingly in aimless confusion, but upon looking closely it could be seen that each one was going about his business, and had some definite duty to perform.

They would drive out of the corrals from four to five hundred at a time, take them out on the prairie and, when the different outfits had stationed themselves around them, it looked like a huge wheel. The

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herd was the hub, from which the riders who were cutting out, kept a constant stream of horses going in every direction.

The Altons, Steve and Blackie, and the Knox boys, who lived near each other (that is, near for the West, being about ten miles apart), decided to put their horses as they were cut out all in one herd. Early the next morning they drove in their saddle band and each one selected for his mount some horse among his string which he knew to be an especially good cutting horse. This meant that he must be exceedingly quick, and handy; able to stop and turn on the instant and dart about like a flash.

Steve, Ira, Ed and Ned were to do the cutting out of their horses. As they rode among the different herds, whenever they saw one or more horses belonging to either, would gradually work it toward the edge, and when they had it outside would endeavor to chase it off to where Blackie, Marcia, Fred and Flint were to guard them. This was no easy matter, as the horses half frenzied from hunger and thirst, did their best to break away, and would double back and twist and turn at the most unexpected moments.

After they were bunched they seethed about, and maddened by the unusual press and confusion, which presaged they knew not what terrors for the future, struggled incessantly to get away, and again enjoy their old delightful freedom.

Frantic mothers lamented the loss of their foals, and strove constantly to go in search of them, and to prevent this kept the riders who were holding them so busy, that, as the bunch increased, two or three more cowboys had to be added to the guard, and Steve sent home for a couple of his younger brothers.

The fine alkali dust rose like a fog, through which the sun shone with ever-increasing intensity, until late

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in the afternoon a sort of hush fell over the prairie. The sun was darkened by a cloud, and a heavy shower cooled the air. The weary cowboys paddled about like a lot of delighted ducks, and the horses, soothed and refreshed, quieted down. When the rain was over they drove them out in large bunches and watered them in the now flooded creek.

Soon the camp fires began to blink out of the gathering dusk, dotting the plains in a large circle. Around these the cowboys gathered. Acquaintances of years met and exchanged greetings, swapped stories, played poker, and took many a daredevil ride on rearing, plunging horses.

An element of sadness would now and then drift through the conversation of the more thoughtful, and there would be heard such remarks as: "The good old days are passing?" Or another would observe: "We'll never see so many horses together again. The range is closing up, and soon the cowboy will be a thing of the past."

"How many horses do you reckon are gathered in this round-up?" asked Walter Milton of a bystander, as they were all as usual speculating upon the number.

"Oh, my, I don't know," said the bystander. "It's hard to tell. The estimates range all the way from ten to fifty thousand. They say these corrals cover from fifteen to twenty acres and, if that is the case, the way they are packed there are lots of horses. I have a corral at home that takes in about one acre, and there have often been two thousand horses in it at a time. And when this round-up is over, and each man markets his horses, the area of the horse is ended, never to be revived. It is the beginning of the end," said he with a sigh.

"Well, it had to be," said Ed Knox. "They are not

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worth anything any more, and we'll have more room to run cattle."

"Yes, if there are any cattle left to run," answered Steve. "The way the rustlers are workin' through the country there soon won't be any cattle left on the range."

"We'll have to settle with them after we get these horses disposed of," said Milton. "They are gettin' too bold. If one or two were swung up it would quiet them down a little."

When they began to talk of cattle rustlers, Blackie, who was sitting near, became restless and began to move about. At this remark from Milton, he said: "Yes, but they'll have to catch them before they hang 'em"

Just then Steve's younger brothers rode up, and one of them handed him a letter.

"Ah, ha!" said Ira, looking over Steve's shoulder. "From California, I see. When is Miss Little coming back?"

"Is she going to come back in time to be out to our picnic the Fourth of July?" asked Marcia.

"She said when she left that she was," answered Steve.

"Well, Miss Parker, my friend from New York will be here then too, so you boys must all be sure and come," said Marcia.

"Yes, we must all be there, because she said she wanted Marcia to have a lot of handsome cowboys on hand," remarked Steve, laughing.

"Have you staked out that claim too?" inquired Ira. "Ain't one enough?"

"Oh, the right man can always pull up the stakes," sneered Blackie.

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"Sure, the right man can," assented Steve. "But I don't believe he's in this crowd."

At last the round-up was over and the different outfits started homeward, herding their horses before them. One by one the neighbors, who had bunched their horses together, cut out theirs as they neared their ranch, until at last there were left only the "—G" horses.

"How many have you?" inquired Ira.

"I don't know," answered Steve. "Let's count them as they cross that gulch." And riding forward they formed the herd into a wide-spreading "V" and as they neared the crossing the rest of the cowboys forced the horses to pass in single file between Ira and Steve, who had stationed themselves in the wide sandy bed of the gulch, and kept tally of the horses as they crossed one behind the other, and then spread out over the prairie and went to grazing.

"How many did you make it?" asked Steve.

"I counted four hundred and eighty-five. How does that tally with your count?"

"I made it four hundred and ninety head," stated Steve, "but that is close enough."

"What are you goin' to do with them when you get them home?"

"We'll put them in the two big pastures east of the house, and hold them there until we sell them. I am expecting a buyer in a few days."

"How much do you expect to get a head for them?"

"I don't know," answered Steve. "The way horses are pouring into Denver I guess we will be lucky if we get ten dollars a head for them." And this estimate proved to be correct, or, in fact, it was not even low enough. The market was flooded with horses, and the bottom fell out of prices, until in spite of the fact that there were many fine horses in their bunch, the

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best offer the Gardeaus could get was seven dollars per head. This they finally accepted and delivered them together with a number of others which they brought in from other parts of the country, only keeping about one hundred head of the best.

Many other ranchers took their horses in at the same time, and one afternoon, as Steve, Ira, Blackie and Flint were standing at the bar of the Stock Yards saloon, drinking and telling stories of the round-up, a stranger approached and after listening to them for awhile, remarked at the close of an unusually good story, speaking with a strong Boston accent.

"That is a pretty good story, and as I've been an uninvited listener I should like to buy the drinks as my share of the entertainment."

"The boys looked him over and seeing only a kindly stranger who was almost shabbily dressed, seemed inclined to accept his invitation and Steve, acting as spokesman for the crowd, said:

"All right, sir, we'll go you." After they had drank the stranger observed:

"I'll tell you, boys, I am just passing through Denver and do not know a soul. My train leaves at three o'clock to-morrow morning, and if you will help me while away the time between I'll pay all expenses, and you can go as far as you like. I'm interested in horses to the extent that I always like to look at a good one when I get a chance, and stayed over to-day on purpose to visit the Stock Yards, as I heard that it was flooded with horses, but I have not a thing to do between now and train-time."

At this speech the cowboys looked at each other for a moment, and then they exclaimed with one accord:

"That sounds good to us. Lead the way, and we'll sure whoop her up."

"What would you like to do first?" inquired the

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stranger. "I am good for a feed for the crowd at the swellest place in town. And before we go any farther, my name is Robinson."

"We are glad to know you Mr. Robinson," said Steve, shaking hands and introducing the others, little thinking that this stranger whom they met so casually was to play such an important part in his life in the near future.

They left the Stock Yards and a short time after entered the cafe of the Brown Palace Hotel. An obsequious waiter found them a table in a secluded corner and handed them the menu, which, of course, in that up-to-date hostelry, was printed in French.

The cowboys looked at this in hopeless confusion for awhile, and then Ira said:

"Here, Steve, *parle vous* this for us. You are French."

"I am French all right, but I don't savy any of this lingo. Let's see what it says on the other side, 'Regular Dinner,' and printed in English. That looks good to me. I don't know how the rest of you feel, but I am hungry enough to eat a regular dinner myself."

"So am I," agreed Flint, to whom the English was almost as unintelligible as the French had been to the others.

This seemed to be an easy way out of the difficulty, so Robinson ordered a Regular Dinner for the crowd, but while they were waiting he ordered a round of cocktails, and a bottle of champagne to be served with the dinner.

Presently the waiter set before each of them a little bowl of consomme, and when they had eaten that, brought an entre composed of a diminutive piece of fish, decorated with parsley. The cowboys looked more and more discouraged as each course came on, and finally when the waiter set down a dainty salad,

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Flint looked at it for a moment, and then calling the waiter, exclaimed:

"Here, waiter, take this away, and bring me something to eat. What-you-may-call-it-in-there, I've already filled up a lot of valuable space with nothin', an' I'm hungry."

"Well, seh," said the waiter. "You all done ordered the Regulah Dinnah, an' dat's what Ise bringin' yeh."

"That doesn't seem to suit," said Mr. Robinson, laughing. "How would a good-sized porter house steak please you boys?"

"If it's a good-sized one it will just suit us," agreed they.

After they left the hotel and were walking down Seventeenth Street, they encountered Ned and Marcia as they were just leaving the Albany on their way to the Broadway Theatre, where a Western play was being given.

"We want to see if it can come up to the real thing," said Ned.

"If it don't, shoot 'em up," suggested the boys recklessly. "And if you can't do it, we'll come and help."

"Well, come along then," answered Ned. "For I guess if I was to start anything like that I'd need help."

"We will go, if you boys wish to," said Robinson. "It is a good play. I saw it in Boston."

They started in the direction of Broadway and had not gone far until some one exclaimed:

"Here comes Ballehan and his wife."

"Let's take them along," suggested Steve. "Here Ballehan, we are all goin' to the theatre, so come along."

"Ah can't go to the theatre, Mr. Steve," objected Mandy. "I'se done jined de church, an' it's 'gin my 'liggin."

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"What church did you join?" inquired Robinson, much amused.

"Ah done jined de Mefodist chuch long time ago, and dey done tole me dat de debil am a sashain' all 'roun' in dem theatres, an' ah don' tink ah'd bettah go."

"Oh, they have changed since you joined the church," objected Steve. "I'm a church member and I go to the theatre every time I come to town and the devil hasn't got me yet, so come along. He'd take me first anyway, and wouldn't be able to carry you, so you are safe."

Somewhat doubting, Mandy and Ballehan fell in behind, and Robinson inquired:

"Will they let us in the theatre?"

"I guess we can get in the Balcony. I've seen coons up there. But they found they could not get seats anywhere except in the Gallery, and as they decided that was too high up they all trooped down to a Curtis Street theatre, where the color line was not so closely drawn. It was a regular blood and thunder play, and as the curtain went up and the characters came on, one of swarthy skin and lank black hair began to speak Spanish. As he rattled off his sentence or two of dialect, Ira, who had been down in Mexico, answered him in that language, the cowboys joining in with the few stock phrases they knew.

The audience looked and laughed appreciatively until first the usher and then the manager came and threatened to put them out. They quieted down for awhile, and Mandy and Ballehan who had not been to a theatre before became intensely interested. Presently the villain, a sombre individual with coal-black hair, lured the hero to the railroad track and slipping up behind him, caught and bound him to the rails. As the train was seen approaching in the distance, Mandy

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to whom it was all real, jumped up with a whoop, and yelled:

"Fo' de Lawd's sake! Won't somebody go an' sabe dat man?" and started to climb over the seat in front and go to the rescue. This was too much; the audience roared with laughter, and the long-suffering manager came and put them out, which through Robinson's intercession was done peaceably.

After leaving Ned and Marcia at the Albany and putting Ballehan and his wife on a car, the cowboys proceeded to show Robinson the town, and when time came for him to take the train, hilariously escorted him to the depot. As he was taking leave of the boys, he remarked to Steve:

"I'll be back this way about October, and will come out and see you. I should like to go on a round-up. You have your beef round-up then, don't you?"

"Yes, that's the time. Be sure and come. We will be glad to have you."

IV

ENTER WOMAN NUMBER TWO

On the fifteenth of June, Miss Parker, accompanied by her aunt arrived at the Grand Central Depot, at 42d Street, New York, and purchased a ticket to Denver. After she had kissed her aunt good-bye, she gave her this parting admonition as she mounted the steps:

"Don't you or mother give Reggie Van Rennssler my address. I do not wish to be annoyed by him any longer."

"Annoyed," marveled her aunt. "Most girls would not consider a proposal from a millionaire an annoyance."

"Well, let him take himself and his millions to them then," answered Miss Parker, determinedly. "I do not wish either." But her aunt only shook her head over the folly of youth and her niece in particular, and returned to the cosy, little flat where she was to spend the summer, and care for her invalid sister, who had years before been stricken with paralysis. Her daughter who was now speeding so happily westward had been her constant companion through all her young girlhood, and was now free for the first time to take a much-needed vacation.

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They had never been wealthy, but had been left comfortably off. However, bad investments and trying new cures had eaten up most of their income, and the daughter was forced to turn her talent for art to practical purposes. This she gladly did, and earned quite a substantial income for herself by illustrating for one of the leading fashion magazines. She had worked steadily for two or three years, and had only given up when her physician forecasted all sorts of dire possibilities if she did not take a rest at once.

Miss Parker was a girl with well-defined ideas as to what she expected the man she married to be, but like all girls the possibility of acquiring an unlimited income had been somewhat alluring, so that Reggie and his proposal disturbed both her sleeping and waking dreams more than she cared to admit. Wishing to put temptation out of her way she had not told him where she was going to spend the summer, and if her aunt and mother would only carry out her instructions, and not give Reggie her address, then she could enjoy her vacation in peace.

But, alas, for her well-laid plans. Hardly had she reached the Alton Ranch and become rested from her trip than Reggie arrived on the scene. Careful as to toilet as ever, he emerged from the folds of a trailing linen duster in which he had muffled himself to protect his costume from the dust of travel. He had even wrapped up his feet so that when he presented himself he was as speckless and spotless as if he had just stepped from a cab at her door.

"Well, where did you come from?" inquired Miss Parker, much dismayed. "And how did you find out where I had gone?"

"Why, your aunt told me, don't-cher-know." Reggie had the advantage or disadvantage of being both an Englishman and a Bostonian, which combination of

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ancestry had been brought about by his parents moving to Boston upon their arrival in this country, his father dying before he became naturalized, and his mother subsequently marrying a wealthy Boston merchant. He had also died leaving the bulk of his fortune to his wife, which Reggie would ultimately inherit.

She had spent much time in England, and so Reggie bore traces of both environments in his accent and conversation, while in person and dress he was the finished man-about-town. His mother and Miss Parker's aunt had been old friends before the former's second marriage, and in this way the two young people had met, and Reggie much to his mother's chagrin, had immediately fallen in love. Being flouted where he had expected to be delightfully accepted, all the stubbornness born of twenty-four years of spoiling at the hands of a doting parent, was crystalized into a determination to win the girl at any cost. True his mother was opposed to the match, but Reggie had had his way too long to be moved by such a tardy attempt at discipline.

Two days after Miss Parker's departure he called at their apartment, and found a willing accomplice in the aunt, who considered it almost sacriligious of her niece to be so indifferent to the material advantages to be gained by the acquisition of so much wealth. Hurrying home he had his valet start packing a huge trunk and several suit cases for his western trip, while Reggie figited about from room to room. At last he put his head into the room and said:

"I don't believe I had better take you along Thomas. Don't-cher-know, them cowboys might make me walk the plank if I arrived with a valet. No that is what they do on the ocean. What is the bally thing they do to people in that awful place they call 'The West'? Oh, Yes! It is to make the tenderfeet dance. Well, I am sure that would be painful as my bally feet are so

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"big I always have to wear shoes four sizes too small." At last the packing was done and they hurried off to catch an eight o'clock train, and Reggie bade his half-weeping servant an almost tearful good-bye. The valet was English also and looked upon his master as quite a hero for attempting such a dangerous enterprise.

V

FOURTH OF JULY

Reggie and Miss Parker had been at the Alton Ranch almost two weeks when the Fourth of July came, and as he had the field all to himself, he began to think that his trip West was not such a bad move after all. His only difficulty was that he had not yet learned to ride or drive with anything like success. True he assayed one or the other every day, but Ned would not trust him with anything but the gentlest of horses. These went so slowly that after one or two trips Miss Parker could not be induced to drive with him again, and if they went for a ride, and any one else was along she would gallop off and leave him to plod along by himself, far in the rear.

However, they could not ride or drive all the time, and on the long, quiet evenings at the ranch he came in handy to help while away the dragging hours. For this reason Miss Parker had shown him more consideration than he had formerly received at her hands, and he was proportionately encouraged.

He tried to persuade Miss Parker to drive with him out to where they were going to hold their celebration, but she laughingly assured him that she wished to get there in time for lunch anyway, and as a means to

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that end, climbed into the wagon with the rest, and Reggie perforce followed.

As the crowd drove out to the picnic grounds a pretty open glade near the creek, circled by large cotton-wood and willow trees; they saw coming across the prairie a light-top buggy, drawn by a long, rangy, dark bay horse, and seated therein, a slender and bronzed young cow-puncher. As he drew nearer, Flint, who was driving, exclaimed:

"Why, it's Steve, in-there."

Then every one began to exclaim: "There's Steve! There's Steve!" And in the voice of each was a mingling of surprise and affection, and in the eyes of Flint was the fond look with which a dog greets its master.

Miss Parker, who was sitting beside Reggie Van Rensseler, wondered who Steve was, of whom they all seemed to be so fond. A number of other cow-boys rode up just then, some singly, some coming in pairs; all tall and slender and riding with easy grace; some were picturesque in leather chaps and gaudy handkerchiefs; others wore white collars and shirts and dark suits.

Wagons drove up loaded with happy-hearted people, bent on a day's outing. Introductions came thick and fast, and soon Miss Parker was lost in maze of new names and faces. Everybody was busy passing from one group to another, greeting old friends, and were only brought to a realization of the passage of time by seeing Mrs. Alton stretching a long table-cloth on the ground under the trees, on which to spread the lunch. Then there was a general bustling about among the wagons in search of lunch boxes.

Ned and Marcia walked around over the grounds, shaking hands with the people and hospitably inviting everybody to come and have lunch with them, so that by the time Mrs. Alton had the hampers emptied and

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the contents placed on the long cloth there were quite a number of people ready to seat themselves around it. Just as they were sitting down a carriage drove up, and Dr. and Mrs. Evanston and Miss Little were its occupants. Marcia immediately invited them to get out and have lunch, then introducing Miss Little to Miss Parker and Mr. Van Rensseler, assigned her a place nearby.

Blackie came along at that moment, and was about to sit down beside her, but when she turned from him to greet Steve with a bright little cry of welcome, he moved away with a scowl. Steve gave her a searching glance as he shook hands, and after he was introduced to Miss Parker, seated himself between her and Miss Little, and as he sat half propped up on one elbow, took silent appraisement of the man and girl from the East. As he watched there came into his eyes a look which was a mingling of contempt and amazement. Contempt for the man who was dressed, manicured and barbered with all the care he would bestow upon his toilet for a promenade up Fifth Avenue, and amazement that a girl like the one before him should allow herself to be identified with him.

"I wonder if that is one of the products of the effete East that she spoke about bein' tired of?" mused he to himself.

In Reggie's manner was a confident and pleased possession, by which he meant to convey to the world that he was a successful suitor. On his face was a smug look of content with himself, and superiority over his fellowmen.

It was impossible to tell from Miss Parker's cool acceptance of his attentions whether the man's assurance pleased her or not. She courteously kept Steve supplied with food out of the abundance that Reggie showered upon her, and laughed appreciatively at the

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constant stream of good-natured banter going on among the others around her.

Presently the conversation drifted to the dance to be held that evening at Kiowa, and some one asked Miss Parker if she was going.

"Of course, she is," answered Marcia.

"I do not know about it," objected Miss Parker. "Marcia tells me they dance all night, and you know I came West for a rest. I never danced all night, and am afraid it will make me too tired. If I could come home at midnight, I should like to go."

"I'll bring you home at twelve o'clock," said Steve, promptly.

"Very well, then, I'll go," acquiesced she, accepting the invitation as coolly as it was offered.

At this Miss Little started and her face grew scarlet. Blackie seeing her confusion looked at Steve with surprise, and maliciously exclaimed:

"Say, ain't you gettin' your dates a little mixed?"

"I don't know as I've mixed any so far," answered Steve, winking at Blackie to keep still.

After lunch things rather lagged for awhile, everybody lounged around in well-filled contentment. Ned in order to liven things up called to Miss Parker:

"Get your mandolin and sing us a song."

"I did not bring it," answered she.

"Well, then, we'll just send somebody for it. Here, Flint, ride to the house and get Miss Parker's mandolin."

While he was gone after it, Reggie, who had set ideas as to how the Fourth of July should be celebrated, produced some fire-crackers and childishly began to try to frighten Miss Parker with them. She, like all girls, jumped and screamed as one went off under her feet, and then wanted one to shoot. Reggie gave her one and held the match to light it.

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Miss Parker fired a few, and then began to tire of the foolish amusement, but every time she turned away Reggie would say:

"Here, shoot another. It is great sport, don't-cher-know."

So Miss Parker hoping to exhaust the supply, fired them off industriously for awhile, Reggie handing them to her one at a time. Finally he had emptied one pocket and Miss Parker breathed a sigh of relief, but he began producing them from another and she exclaimed in dismay:

"Are you made of fire-crackers?"

"Gee, I wish I had some fire-crackers," drawled Fred Knox to a group of cowboys standing near.

"Yes, I guess them are about as dangerous weapons as Reggie'd dare carry," said Ira.

"It's a wonder he didn't bring a bean-shooter. That'd be more appropriate for a Bostonian," commented Steve.

Just then Flint returned with the mandolin and Miss Parker with an eye for the picturesque found a seat between two trees that grew out of the earth side by side, and spread apart just high enough from the ground to make a sort of rustic chair. The cowboys gathered around, Steve leaning against a tree near Miss Parker.

"What shall I sing?" asked she.

"Oh, sing that one about wantin' to be loved," suggested Ned. "I think that will just about make a hit with these boys."

"Yes, sing that," said Steve. "I believe that will just suit me."

"Miss Parker played a few chords, and started to sing the foolish little ditty and as she sang, the boys kept edging a little nearer, but Steve had the most

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strategic position and would not allow any one to oust him.

The girl was unusually attractive, having jet black hair, creamy skin and soft brown eyes, and had long ago learned her power over men. Her voice was nothing remarkable, but clear and sweet, and the boys attracted by her personality and rich beauty, lingered on as she sang one song after another.

The belated arrival of a keg of beer proved a counter attraction after awhile, and they drifted away, one by one in the direction of the clump of trees where it was hidden, all but Steve.

As they came back, Ira remarked:

"Look at Steve. He's sure hard hit. Never knew a girl to keep him interested when there was anything to drink handy."

"Yes, she's got him hog-tied and eatin' sugar from her hand," said Fred. "But where does Miss Little come in?"

"I guess she's in the discard," answered Ned. "And she looks like she ain't enjoyin' it any too much either." And then he called:

"Oh, Steve! Come over here. I've got something to show you."

"Let me alone," demanded Steve. "Don't you see this is the first time I have been happy in six months?"

"Old Steve sure had the nerve to ask her to go to the dance right before that beau of hers from New York," observed Ira.

"Guess she don't care much about Reggie, as she didn't hesitate any about acceptin' Steve's invitation," said Fred.

"Yes, but that may just be her way of keepin' him guessin'. Not many girls have the courage to refuse a millionaire, even if he ain't much of a man," said Ned.

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"Let's get up some games," suggested Flint.

"Call Steve, Ned," said Fred. "He used to be some good, but now all he can do is stand around and listen to 'I Want to be Loved' played on the mandolin."

"No use to call him," exclaimed Ned. "I did call him. I'll see if I can wake her up," and then he shouted:

"Oh, Miss Parker. Take the hobbles off of Steve and turn him loose with the herd. We want to have some fun."

Reggie came up and he and Miss Parker joined the crowd.

Blackie mounted a horse and Steve untied his lariat and with a graceful sweep of his arm, sent his rope curling out and the loop settled over Blackie and around the horse's neck. Then he caught the horse by first one foot and then the other, and then by both as Blackie galloped by, and as a wind-up to the performance, threw a large noose and caught both Fred and Blackie as they approached each other in coming from opposite directions.

Ira and Ned had a wrestling match, and soon everybody was doing something. There were no seats, so Reggie took a lap robe from the wagon and spread it on the ground to make a seat for Miss Parker.

Ned tired from his wrestling sat down beside her to rest. Steve saw him, and exclaimed:

"Here you, that's my seat," and catching him by the arm pulled him up and sat down himself.

Then Blackie pulled Steve up and sat down in his place, and the latter went around on the other side.

Soon Reggie was crowded off entirely as the cowboys laughingly scrambled for a seat on the robe beside Miss Parker, who, very much amused, took it all in the spirit in which it was meant.

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Several more drifted up and threw themselves on the ground and presently Ira suggested:

"Let's see who can tell the biggest lie. I'll tell one and then some one else see if they can tell a bigger."

"All right," assented Ned. "Go ahead."

"Well, let's talk about strong men. While I was out in Wyoming I saw a man that was so strong that when he picked up a big ball of iron and squeezed it it all squashed out between his fingers."

"Pshaw, that's nothin'," observed Fred Knox. "I heard of a man that was a lot stronger than that. You know in the beginnin' the earth wasn't like it is now, it was a lot bigger, and a strong man put his arms around it and squeezed it in two."

"Yes, and when he got through it was all dry land, wasn't it?" inquired Ned.

"Yes," agreed Fred.

"Well, that strong man had a pal, and he wasn't so strong in his arms like them two fellows you and Ira tell about, but he was a great one to chew tobacco, and after that man had squeezed the earth in two, he spit just once, and it splattered and made five oceans."

While they were still laughing over the finish of Ned's story, two men and a boy were seen driving up, leading a horse. Presently one of them approached Ned and said:

"Are you Mr. Alton?"

"That's my father's name. He is over there. My name is Ned."

"Well," answered the fellow laughing. "My name is Baxter. I came out to Kiowa this morning from Denver, thinking the picnic was there. I've brought along a horse that can run a little and I'd like to match a race with you."

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"Well, I haven't anything that is fit to race, but maybe Steve has. He generally has a race horse." When they approached Steve on the subject he objected, saying:

"Oh, my horse is in no condition to run. I just got him in off the range yesterday, and then drove him over here to-day."

"Which is your horse?" inquired Mr. Baxter.

"That's him over there hitched to that buggy, but he is in no condition to run, been running out all spring."

The horse in question certainly did not show up very well, although the discerning could see that he was built for speed, having an unusual length of body and limbs, but he was covered with alkali dust which had been matted in his hair by the long drive over.

The more Mr. Baxter looked at him the more anxious he became for a race, and finally Steve said: "Well, if I can get some one to ride my horse, I'll run him."

Looking around among the crowd he found a boy who was small for his age and proportionately light, who had acted as jockey for him before. As soon as Mr. Baxter found that the race was assured, he began trying to get bets and as no one, after sizing up the two horses, cared to bet he began to increase the odds.

Flint came up to Steve and said:

"What-you-may-call-it-in-there, them fellers are offerin' to bet five dollars to one that their horse can beat yours."

"Well, take all you can get at them odds, and if you haven't the money, borrow it.

"If they knew this horse they wouldn't be so reckless with their money. He is one of them rawboned, ugly cusses that looks worse when in condition than out, and while he ain't had any trainin' this year and

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has run out all summer, still there ain't been enough grass to make him fat.

"It's been so dry they have to go a long ways to water, and several times when I've been out ridin' I've seen him start out with a bunch of horses to go to some water hole for a drink, and they'd all be runnin' like the devil was after 'em, and that old rangy bay was always in the lead. You know them old Revenue horses can all run. I'll bet all I can get at them odds."

The word went around among the cowboys and ranchers that Steve's horse might be in better condition than he looked, and as most of them knew what he could do when in shape, they began to place bets, putting up a few dollars at a time, so as not to make Mr. Baxter suspicious. Presently the two men had up all the money they brought with them, and expected to make quite a clean-up.

They paced off a half mile track along the level road that led to Kiowa, and the two horses lined up for the start.

The boy who came with Mr. Baxter stripped off his outer garments and stood arrayed in brilliant jockey costume of green and white, and as he sat on his satiny-coated thoroughbred, he made a striking contrast to the rough-coated range horse, and the bare-footed boy in overalls on its back.

"What fools these cowboys are," remarked Reggie, contemptuously. "Do they think that old buggy horse can beat that trained race horse? Why their old horse looks all played out, don't-cher-know, and covered with dirt."

"I don't know," answered Miss Parker, "whether it can outrun the other or not. Anyway, the cowboys are not afraid to back him with money."

"Well, I am not either," answered Reggie, rather

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nettled. "I'll wager two hundred dollars that the sorrel wins."

"At five to one?" asked Steve, who chanced to hear the remark.

"At whatever odds you wish, don't-cher-know."

"Oh, that's good enough for me," said Steve putting up forty dollars.

Reggie pulled out a fat roll and stripped off two one hundred dollar bills and placed them with the stake holder. Others hearing of the wager, came up, and Reggie accommodated all until he had a thousand dollars bet; ranging in sums all the way from five to fifty dollars besides the two hundred dollars bet with Steve.

Ned hearing of it came up to Reggie and said: "Ain't you goin' in rather steep on a horse you know nothin' about?"

"Oh, I guess I can stand it if the rest can," replied Reggie, insolently. "I don't think I am taking much of a chance, don't-cher-know."

"All right," said Ned. "I guess you know your business."

The thoroughbred champed his bit, and pranced, and the jockey had all he could do to hold him in, while Steve's horse stood calmly at the post, seemingly half asleep, until the word "Go!" sounded like a trumpet in his ear, and he shot out from the line in one long leap that carried him far in advance, and then for a hundred yards or so he bounded along, seemingly never drawing a breath. After that the pace slackened somewhat, but he was already so far in the lead that the other horse could not overtake him.

The cowboys shouted and tossed their wide sombreros in the air and danced up and down like maniacs, hugging each other in their joy. Nearly every one had placed a bet either with Reggie or Mr. Baxter, and many had bets with both, so all stood to win something,

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but greater than that was the partisan joy of having their horse win. Mr. Baxter and his partner were so disgusted and chagrined that they hadn't a word to say. They simply paid their bets, hitched up their horse and started back to Denver.

Miss Parker went up to pet Kentucky Jim and present him with a piece of candy, which he nosed for appreciatively. As to the victor belongs the spoils, she consented to drive back to the ranch with Steve, leaving the crestfallen Reggie to go back without her, in the wagon with the rest of the people from the ranch. They were ready to go before Steve had his bets all straightened out and as Miss Parker did not like to stand around and wait for him, she started to get in the wagon to return with them.

Steve seeing her came up and said:

"I thought you were going to ride with me?"

"Very well," assented Miss Parker. "You do not mind, do you Reggie?" And Reggie weakly answered "No."

When they reached the buggy, they found Ira already seated in it, and as Steve offered to help Miss Parker in, she drew back and inquired: "Where do you expect me to sit?"

"On our laps," suggested they.

"Is that the custom of the country?" inquired she.

"Yes," they replied.

"Well, I do not believe I am sufficiently Westernized to adopt it as yet," spoke she, starting to turn away.

"Come on," urged Steve. "There is plenty of room, this buggy was built to hold three, you can sit between us."

"Oh, all right," said Miss Parker, laughingly accepting the novel situation.

"But how is it that I find two cowboys riding in

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a carriage anyway? I am surprised; I supposed they were always dashing about on horseback, and preferred a bucking broncho to anything on wheels?" observed she.

"I heard about you visiting the Altons, and I expected I might get a chance to take you to the dance," said Steve. "And Ira has just come back from Wyoming and drove over from Elizabeth with the Mannings."

"What cool assurance," said Miss Parker. "Do you always get what you expect?"

"Well, I always try to get it," answered Steve.

"You two all dated up already! Why don't you hold off awhile and give some other fellow a chance? I was just figuring on askin' Miss Parker to go to the dance with me," said Ira.

"Well, you can ask her yet, she might change her mind."

"That's right," spoke Ira. "Steve and I are old pals, so you take your choice."

"A Western Damon and Pythias," remarked Miss Parker. "But the matter is already settled. I have said I would go with Mr. Gardeau, and I never break an engagement or give one partner a dance belonging to another, no matter how much I might be tempted, it makes the favored one too conceited."

Blackie rode up beside the buggy on a horse that seemed to be about half broken.

"Make him buck," urged Steve. Blackie, nothing loth, viciously jabbed in his spurs, and the horse instantly responded by humping his back into a half circle, and, gathering his four legs together, jumped straight up and landed stiff legged, giving his body a sinuous twist at the same time. This he repeated with variations several times, but Blackie stuck like a burr and seemed to enjoy it.



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"What a vicious beast!" exclaimed Miss Parker as Blackie returned. "Do not make him buck again, he might kill you."

While supper was being prepared and the long summer twilight came on the cowboys, too restless to sit still, went out in front of the house, and as usual when a number of them were together, the boyish spirit, which is not far from the surface in these knights of the saddle at any time, came uppermost. They were soon running foot races, jumping and wrestling with all the abandon and enthusiasm of boys of ten. In all these tests of agility Steve and Blackie easily led; first one winning and then the other, but with this difference: When Blackie won it was often through some trick or fluke, and received little applause or commendation, while everybody always seemed pleased when Steve won, and sorry when he lost. Thus spoke the difference of personality between the two.

Presently Steve and Ira went down on all fours and began to buck, with old man Alton's two little grandsons on their backs as riders. Ducking their heads, they humped their backs, and twisted their sinuous bodies in imitation of all the contortions known and practiced on them by the horses they had ridden.

The little boys twined their legs tightly around the bodies of their impromptu steeds, and left arms and hands waving free, to show that they scorned to pull leather, but at last they were unseated and thrown, just as the gong (an old ploughshare, on which Ned pounded with a clevis) sounded for supper.

Reggie and Miss Parker had been interested spectators throughout it all and, as they turned away, Reggie remarked:

"They are all drunk."

"Yes, but with the intoxication of youth and boundless vitality," replied Miss Parker.

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While Miss Parker was dressing to go to the dance, Marcia came in and asked:

"Are you going with Steve? What is poor Reggie going to do?"

"I do not care what he does," said Miss Parker, laughing.

"He should have known better than to follow me out here. If I do not do something to make him angry he will stay all summer.

"Poor Reggie! It is awfully hard for him to learn that he can not have everything he wants. He has been an only child and a mamma's darling, and, not having much imagination, so far, his money has procured for him whatever he desired. He thought that, of course, since we are poor and my mother an invalid, that his money would win me, even if I could resist his own fascinating personality.

"His mother was furious at him for wanting to marry me, and now that I have refused him she is raging at the presumption of 'That girl' as she calls me. But the man I marry will have to be a man, anyway, and do something else besides act as a tailor's dummy for displaying fine clothes."

When they were ready to start, Miss Parker was surprised to see Steve appear newly arrayed in clean linen and a spotless and neatly-pressed light gray suit.

"His tie is a little too vivid, but it is probably a Christmas present from his mother or sisters. I wonder how he happened to know that that shade of gray was just the color for blonds? He is more handsome than I thought and if his face was not so tanned would be quite distinguished looking." Thus did Miss Parker take mental appraisal of her cavalier, and her next remark was along that line.

"How did you achieve it?" inquired she, looking him over.

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"Achieve what?" asked Steve.

"A fresh toilet, so far from home? Do you carry a Saratoga along with you as Reggie does?"

"No," answered Steve. "I told my sister to bring me clothes over. She couldn't come to the picnic, but is going to the dance, and came just after we got through supper."

"Well, I am agreeably surprised. When I saw you brushing the dust off your clothes before going in to supper I supposed that was all the concession a cowboy made to the conventions, but now I am prepared for anything. Have the rest been equally as fortunate?"

"No, they ain't all lucky enough to have a sister bring them a fresh relay of clothes, but they are all out in the bunk house doin' their best. The first man dressed always had the best clothes. He picks out what he wants regardless of who they belong to, and the rest take what they can get. Blackie had to sit on the clothes my sister brought him while he shaved, and the only thing Ira could find that wasn't already appropriated was a clean collar, so when I came out he was puttin' on the clothes I pulled off."

"I wouldn't think they could be any great improvement over what he had on, after you have been rolling around in the dirt in them all day, wrestling and bucking," laughed Miss Parker.

"No, but he thinks they are. And they say imagination is a great thing."

It was only four miles from the Alton Ranch to Kiowa, where the dance was to be held, and as it was early, Steve drove slowly along; twilight deepened into the thick darkness of a summer night, which pressed upon the senses with strange hypnotic power. Soon the shifting gleams of a new moon threw a luminous whiteness over the silent prairie, piercing the gloom.

The girl had the sensitive organism of all artistic

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people, to which the forces of nature made a strong appeal. They both fell silent for awhile, and then Miss Parker spoke out of her simple child-like faith.

"I do not wonder that God used to talk direct to people when they lived simple, pastoral lives, so close to nature. I can feel my soul expand, and seemingly being purged of everything petty, small, and mean. It is not surprising that wickedness thrives in the cities. People are shut in until their souls become as narrow as the walls of the box-like places that confine their bodies, and which they call 'home.'

"Right now is the season of hottest weather in New York, and my heart aches with pity when I think of all the people who are sweltering with the unbearable heat. Wouldn't it be splendid if we could, by some magic, puff through its noisy streets some of this dry, cool air?"

"Yes, but it is impossible to take the air to the people, and when the people are brought to the air they often pine and fret until they get back again. A man from New York came out here for lung trouble a few years ago. He was improvin' right along, but the silence and loneliness that appeals so to you got on his nerves he said, and he went back. Said he'd rather live one year there, than fifty out here—and it's the same way with women.

"There's lots of girls come out here from the city to teach and they pretend to like it awfully well, but I notice very few of them marry and stay out here, and it ain't because they lack chances. Women are so scarce out here that most any kind of a girl, no matter how homely, can get a pretty decent sort of a man, as men go, for a husband. I suppose you are like the rest, you'll amuse yourself with us poor cowpunchers for the summer, but when it comes to marryin', it'll be the bean eater from Boston that'll win out."

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"I don't know about that," laughingly answered she. "Since the world began women have blindly followed men who have been great enough to inspire them with sufficient love. I suppose I am no exception to the rule, and would go anywhere, or live anywhere if the right man beckoned."

"Well, if that's the case I'm goin' to try mighty hard to be that man and don't you forget it, but here we are at Kiowa, and there comes Blackie with Miss Little."

Now Steve had not been strictly truthful when he told Miss Parker that he had come to the picnic in the buggy because he had heard that she was to be there. He had really intended to take Miss Little, who had told him in the spring, when she was leaving, that she would be out at the picnic the Fourth, and had confirmed it in her letter applying for the school for the next winter.

We are all aware of the value of opposition in matters of the heart. Many parents, by opposing a match, have hurried on what they hoped to avert. So the rivalry between Steve and Blackie had stimulated the interest of both. This Miss Little well knew, and had mercilessly led them both on, although as long as she felt sure of them, she did not think she wanted either. All summer she had been debating the matter in her mind, and it was not as to which one she would take. She had long ago decided against Blackie, who had been shrewd enough to divine it, and so had not put the question to the test.

She did not want to become engaged and put an end to the fascinating game she had been playing all winter. "It was much nicer to have two lovers than one," she thought, but there was one thing on which she had not reckoned. After she had left, and there was no longer the incentive of outwitting Blackie, Steve's in-

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terest in the game began to flag, and when he saw Miss Parker, he forgot all about his earlier intention, and poor, little Miss Little, when she saw the prize escaping, began to realize the extent of her loss.

When Blackie had seen Steve getting ready that morning he went off on horseback, although he knew Miss Little was to be at the picnic. He thought, of course, Steve was intending to take her to the dance, and did not wish to go prepared to take her, and chance being humiliated by seeing her go off with Steve, as had happened before. When he learned that Steve was going to take Miss Parker he borrowed a cart from Ned, which was the only vehicle available, and went after her.

There was a large crowd at the dance, which was held in a hall over Wiley's General Merchandise Store, and the place was well filled. Most of the people whom Miss Parker had met at the picnic were there and a good many others. The air became rather close in the early part of the evening, and the fastidious Reggie, who was devoting himself to Miss Little in hopes of making Miss Parker jealous, began to sniff and coming up to Ned who was talking to Steve, said:

"Really, Ned, this air is stifling, don't-cher-know. I do not believe these people ever take a bawth. I'll have to chuck it or I'll cat. (Making a sidewise duck with his head and opening his mouth expressively, which left no doubt of his meaning.)

"Well, cat, then," said Ned, laughing, and comically emitting a meow and spitz like a cat.

The joke was too good to keep and soon everybody had heard of the way in which Reggie relieved his stomach of any foreign substance, and there were delighted meowings, spittings and caterwalling all over the hall every time Reggie appeared.

As the strains of the first waltz commenced Steve

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led Miss Parker out on the floor, and she was amazed at the grace and ease with which he danced.

One after another of the cowboys danced with her, and paid her more or less broadsided compliments. When she was dancing with Ira, he heaved a sigh that seemingly came from his boots and said:

"Gee! but I'm lucky to-night. Dancing my favorite waltz, with the prettiest girl I ever saw." This was too much for Miss Parker, who laughingly appealed to Marcia.

"Tell me, is the range a finishing school for men. I never have been so jollied in my life, and I never saw better dancers. I always understood that New Yorkers carried off the palm for talking nonsense, but these cowboys seem to be past masters at the art. How can one stem the tide of their flattery?"

"I don't know," said Marcia, laughing. "It is not exactly jollying, for they mean it for the time anyway. Steve just told me awhile ago that the Humane Society ought to prevent girls like you from straying off their natural range. That it was cruelty to animals for you to come out here and make the boys discontented with home products.

"They ought to be good dancers," continued Marcia. "As they commenced dancing and riding about the time children back East are learning to walk good. That is practically the only amusement out here, and whenever there is a dance everybody goes and takes all their children along. They pack the babies and little ones on a bed or in some corner out of the way, where they sleep on undisturbed through all the noise of squeeking fiddles and stamping feet. When they get old enough to keep awake they begin trying to dance and coax somebody to lead them around for awhile, and they soon get the step. Their life in the saddle makes them light on their feet."

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When twelve o'clock came Miss Parker was enjoying herself as only a young girl can when surrounded by a lot of admirers, and never thought about her intention of going home at that time.

A few people who lived near began to leave after the midnight supper, but those who came from a long distance stayed on until daylight came, to make driving over the prairie, which was virgin of roads, a safe proceeding.

Miss Parker and Steve left the dance following closely behind Marcia and Ned as the first gray streaks of early dawn were stealing over the prairie, and the distant mountain range that ran parallel with their course still showed only as a black shadow against the western horizon.

Black, too, against the sky at the south loomed a crest of rocky hills covered with a thick growth of pine trees. The stars twinkled and grew dim, vanishing and lost in the rosy light which spread across the east, announcing the birth of a new day.

The two young people for a time watched with something like awe the quick changes of coloring playing over the mountains and sky. Miss Parker being unused to the climate, had only taken along a light evening wrap, such as she used in the East, and soon began to shiver in the chill morning air. She paid no attention to it at first, but as the wind raised with the advent of the sun, the shivering fast became a seizure.

"What is the matter?" inquired Steve.

"I do not know," answered she. "I seem to have a chill. I should have brought along a warmer wrap, but I never thought about it being so cold this morning. I might have known it, too, as I have been sleeping under blankets ever since I came. Is it always so cold?"

"It is generally cool out here of nights, but, of course,

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I do not notice it. I am used to it. I'll square myself around so as to keep the wind off of you. I make a fine wind-break."

"How do you know, have you been used much for that purpose?" inquired she, mischievously. "But I know you have. Such proficiency in paying compliments denotes much practice."

"What is that about, 'From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh?' My heart has been talkin' mighty loud ever since I saw you yesterday, and what I've told you ain't half what it's been sayin'."

"Is it not behaving rather recklessly for such short acquaintance?" inquired she.

"Well, maybe the time is short as you measure it by days and weeks, but it seems to me like I'd known you for a long time."

"I can understand it in a measure. I suppose it is the vastness and stillness. It is like being out on the ocean, where friendships ripen quickly. I will admit that you undoubtedly attract me, although I am filled with surprise at my being prompted to tell you so. I never would have admitted as much to a man back East.

"It seems to me that you have a remarkable amount of what is known as personal magnetism, which I imagine must have greatly smoothed life's pathway for you, and enabled you to easily acquire many things that others strive for in vain. I noticed it last evening, when you boys were running races and jumping. It was easy to see that you and your brother, whom they call 'Blackie,' were far ahead of the others, and evenly matched in skill, yet he received little applause when he won, but when you beat, every one seemed delighted. It is hardly fair, I think, although no one is to blame."

"I never thought about it before," replied Steve.

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"But I guess there is something in what you say, and if it enables me to attract you, then I am glad I have it. You must have quite a lot of magnetism yourself, for I've been plumb locoed ever since I first saw you yesterday."

"Perhaps you think so now, but to-morrow you may feel differently. This early morning light, I believe, is as bad as moonlight for misleading young people's affections," answered Miss Parker, laughing.

"Maybe so, but I certainly do enjoy bein' misled."

Just then they heard another vehicle approaching and upon looking around saw Blackie and Miss Little behind them.

"What's the matter?" inquired Steve. "From the way you are makin' that horse eat up the road you two must not be enjoyin' yourselves."

Blackie growled out something in reply, and Miss Little gave him an angry look. They all four entered the house at the same time, and as Steve took leave of Miss Parker, with a tender, caressing look in his eyes, Miss Little, with never a glance at Blackie hurried out, her eyes filled with unshed tears which came in a flood when she reached her room. Bitterly did she regret her coquetry of the winter before. After a time the paroxysm of weeping passed, and she began to consider the situation in which she found herself, and at last murmured resolutely:

"There is one thing sure, no girl from New York will marry a man and live out here, so I will teach the school this winter and win him back. Guess I had better quit playing with fire. It is a dangerous pas-time." Finding consolation in this thought she fell asleep.

Steve unhitched his horse and found a bed in one of the bunk houses, while Blackie saddled up and savagely galloped homeward.

FOURTH OF JULY

Miss Little awoke along about noon, and determined to make the best of a bad situation. Anyway, she thought, there was Reggie, who was in much the same plight as herself, and had the added charm of being a millionaire.

After every dance a number of cowboys would drift into the Alton Ranch to sleep and rest up. The day after the Fourth was no exception to the rule. They arose when their fancy dictated, and one by one joined the crowd in the yard, all more or less disheveled after the dance, and lounged in careless ease on the ground, heedless alike of the dirt and wrinkles with which their clothes were being covered. Presently Reggie, who liked to listen to the stories and good-natured banter with which they passed the time, strolled out; faultlessly dressed as ever, sox and tie to match, and feet incased in brilliantly polished tan shoes.

Like all the English he had remarkably large feet, and this was a sore point with him. He was always dressed in the height of fashion, and would stand before the glass and preen and primp by the hour, but like the peacock, when he looked at his feet his spirits dropped if his feathers didn't. In vain did he pinch his feet into shoes two or three sizes too small, they still looked all out of proportion to the rest of his body.

A silence fell over the group of cowboys as Reggie appeared among them. This Reggie accepted as a fitting tribute of the country person to one of his great wealth and as he deemed, extensive culture. But he did not rightly interpret the cowboys. They were simply observing him as they would a new specimen from the zoo, and when they were satisfied, fell to conversing as before, paying no more attention to him. At this Reggie perched himself on the fence, and carefully pulled up each leg of his trousers to keep them from

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bagging at the knees, revealing his gaudy silk sox clear to their rainbow tops. These caught and held the slanting rays of the sun, which filtered through the leaves of the trees, and showed up Reggie's feet in striking relief against the shadows around them. Ned who always loved a joke, looked up and saw them, and with an appreciative chuckle, inquired:

"Say, Reggie, how old are you?"

"I am twenty-three, why?" inquired Reggie.

"Oh, go on. You must be older than that," protested Ned.

"No, I am not," answered Reggie.

"Why, man, you must be!" seriously objected Ned.

"No! I was born on the twenty-ninth of December in the year of 1876," said Reggie, precisely. "Do you think I look older than that?" asked he hopefully, for like all young men he wished to be thought older than he was.

"No, your face don't," said Ned. "But do you mean to tell me you have grown them feet in twenty-three years? Why, man, you couldn't a-done it."

At the yell of laughter from the cowboys, who had understood from the beginning that Ned was baiting him, Reggie climbed down, much crestfallen, and went off in search of Miss Little, with whom he seemed to have a bond in common. After awhile they came past, each making a great show of paying marked attention to the other, in hopes of showing to Steve and Miss Parker, who had just then appeared, that they cared nothing for their slights.

VI

DRAINING THE LAKE

The house on the Alton Ranch was situated on Kiowa Creek, which ran through the place, and at the point where the buildings were it spread out into a wide, flat basin, with high walls on either side, forming a natural sight for a reservoir. The former owner with fine business acumen had taken advantage of this and built a dam at the low end of the hill, and thus had a lake of quite respectable dimensions for Colorado. He used the water for irrigating his meadow land, and raised splendid crops of alfalfa.

Long ago it had been stocked with several different kinds of fish, among which were some mud carp. These were so full of bones that they did not care to eat them so whenever one was caught it was thrown back into the lake. By this process they soon multiplied until the lake was overrun with them. They ate the young fish of the other varieties to make room for their own spawn.

Ever since the Altons had owned the ranch they had been planning to drain the lake and take out all the carp and restock it with good fish, which could be had from the Government Fisheries outside of Denver. So at their Fourth of July picnic they had announced that the second Sunday following they would draw off the water and invited everybody to come and bring their friends.

Now, fresh fish is almost an unknown luxury on

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the plains, so people flocked from far and near to get some, bringing their lunches, and making a gala day of it. Ned put a screen across the sluice gates, and then opened them, letting the water rush out to flood the meadows below. Soon the uneasy fish began flopping about.

Men and boys pulled off their boots and shoes, rolled up their trousers and waded in. At first every one attended strictly to catching fish, dipping them up in buckets, or grabbing them with their hands, until the water began to get lower and they could see that there were hundreds of them, more than enough for all.

Then began the fun. They ducked each other, and threw the soft, slimy mud of the banks. Suddenly, upon looking up, Steve saw a young cowpuncher and his new wife, all decked out in their nuptial finery, standing bashfully on the bank. Steve shouted to Ned:

"Look who's here."

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" said Ned. "All dressed up, too, with a biled shirt on. Let's duck him."

No sooner said than done. Both putting on a look of guileless innocence, walked up the bank as if to congratulate the grinning bridegroom, grabbed him at an unexpected moment and had him half way down the bank before he realized what they were up to, and then began a lively tussle. Others joined the fun and helped to carry the struggling cowboy down the bank, and stand him on his head in the black mud. Then they lifted him and set his feet down, and the thick oozy mud and water from his face and head ran all over his gay plaid suit.

At this pandemonium let loose. Others in the water ran out on the bank and grabbed unwary on-lookers, dragged them into the water, and woe to the ones who had foolishly donned their good clothes. They were the especial victims.

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Reggie stood beside Miss Parker, and owing to the etiquette due a stranger he had not been molested, although many a longing glance had been cast in his direction, and they all would have been delighted to see his fashionable clothes splashed with mud. But Reggie was unmindful of his danger, and continued to make disdainful remarks, loud enough for any who were passing to hear.

This made Miss Parker, who was enjoying the fun, angry, and as Steve ran past, chasing another victim, with a look and slight inclination of the head, she signaled for him to take Reggie. Nothing could have pleased Steve better, and emitting a loud whoop, which would have done credit to a Commanchee Indian, he grabbed the Bostonian and started to take him to the lake, saying:

"Come on, and take that bawth you've been talkin' so much about." But Reggie was not as easy prey as might have been expected from his slight build. He made up in skill in boxing and wrestling what he lacked in size and muscle, and was a good match for Steve's wiry strength.

Ira ran up to help Steve, but Ned who was standing near, said:

"Keep back. It shore don't take two of us to handle one city dude."

Finally Steve took him down to the edge of the mud, which was now several feet above the water. Reggie's feet slipped and he went down with Steve on top, almost burying him in the ooze and slime, where he held him while he washed his face with great handfuls of mud.

While the wrestling had been going on, the crowd fell silent. Nowhere was heard the shouting and laughter that had accompanied the downfall of other victims. Every one seemed to recognize the fact

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that the playful element was lacking in this contest. All were aware of the episode of the Fourth, when Steve had boldly carried off the lady from under the nose of the millionaire who had crossed the continent in her wake, and were wondering what the next move would be, but the lady had said "Thumbs down" again for Reggie, and they were wondering if it meant "Thumbs up" for Steve, but they expressed their sentiments only in sly nudges and winks as Reggie slunk off up the hill, muttering impotent threats of vengeance.

This seemed to put a period to the fun, as it was already getting late. Everybody began to collect their belongings and get ready to start home.

From Reggie's room could be heard mutters, cursing, and a noise of trunks and grips being jerked and slammed about. For the first time in all his pampered life, Reggie was packing up. That night he sought out Miss Parker and with tears in his eyes again pleaded with her to marry him and leave this beastly place, as he called it. But her answer was characteristically open and frank, and she said:

"No, Reggie I can't marry you. I wish I could, as like all girls, I should like the many pretty things your money would buy. It is too bad, you were so mollycoddled in your youth, for from the game fight you put up to-day and the stubbornness you evince in your wooing, I believe there is good stuff in you and that you could do something worth while if you ever set your mind to it. Earning my own living has made me too self-reliant, I suppose. I could never respect a man who could not put his shoulder to the wheel and make his own way."

These ideas were too radical for Reggie, and meditating for a moment he said:

"Well, at any rate, I shall start for New York in

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the morning, and when you return perhaps you will feel differently. I suppose if I had to I could 'put my shoulder to the wheel,' as you call it, but I don't see the necessity, don't-cher-know. What's the use of grinding when some one has already done it for you. I find it quite hard enough work putting the money in circulation. It is no end of bother standing for four or five hours at a time while some grubby tailor fits my clothes, without earning the money to buy them. Have to get up at five o'clock in the morning to catch that early train, so as to make connections in Denver with a train going East. Guess I had better say good-bye to you to-night. Beastly bore, getting up so early. Sure you won't change your mind and go with me?" said he, shaking hands perfunctorily, all other emotions seemingly overshadowed by the awful thought of having to get up at five o'clock.

The next morning as the wagon clattered off bearing Reggie and his huge trunk and many suitcases, Miss Parker looked out of the window, and as they disappeared over the hill, sighed and said somewhat regretfully to herself:

"Well, I suppose that is my last chance to become a millionairess. There are not many young men with a million or two at his command searching for struggling young illustrators to endow with their riches. Too bad that money and brains so seldom go together, especially inherited money. Now if Reggie was only like Steve, or Steve had Reggie's millions—yes, if," and with that she drew the shade and went back to bed.

VII

CHASING THE CATTLE THIEVES FROM COVER

About twenty miles southeast of Denver, on Cole Creek, somewhat back from the road, stands an old-fashioned, large, square house, partially hidden by great cottonwood trees, whose shimmering leaves twinkle in the bright sunlight, and strive to lessen the melancholy gloom that prevades the premises. Whatever motive prompted the original owner to erect such a house on that dry, barren ranch, was quickly abandoned, and the buildings soon became the nesting place of owls and chattering magpies that flew in and out through a broken window pane, making the empty rooms to echo with the ghostly swishing of their wings.

Now and then some chance tenant would occupy the place for awhile, but after a time it would be vacated, and again revert to its former state of dusty emptiness. At last it seemed to be utterly deserted. No one had lived there for several years; doors creaked on their hinges as they swung back and forth by every gust of wind, and through these skulking coyotes would sometimes peer cautiously, and sniffing at the ancient man smell, patter about, taking advantage of this rare opportunity to curiously inspect the habitation of his greatest enemy.

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However, at last passersby noticed that the ranch showed signs of being occupied. The windows of the lower floor were thrown open, and a thin hatchet-faced woman briskly swept and scrubbed, while outside a man with low brow and heavy visage went about the business of repairing the corral so as to keep his saddle horse from straying away. This done he rode about among the neighbors, buying a few head of cattle here and there, and when these were branded and turned loose on the range it looked as though the old house had at last found a permanent tenant.

No one knew from whence they came, for whenever they were questioned they would simply state that they were from back East and then quickly change the subject. As it was not considered polite, and in many cases hardly safe to inquire too closely into a man's past, the matter would be dropped.

However, it is not necessary to know a person's former residence in order to judge their character. Like draws like, and after a few years people began to notice that most of the near-do-wells of the country seemed to collect at Bradley's as the people were called, and always found a ready welcome. And simultaneously, his herds became very prolific, and now and then a cow could be seen caring for two calves, while Bradley bought more right along, and always seemed to be plentifully supplied with money.

Heavy beef steers just ready for market had a way of disappearing suddenly off the range, and people began to couple those disappearances with the many night trips made by Bradley to Denver, always with heavily laden wagon. One day when a number of them chanced to meet, the suspicion which had been gradually crystalizing in their minds was openly voiced, and it was finally agreed that they would all keep a sharp lookout for proof of his guilt, and once

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that was obtained the solution would be very simple, as there were many trees quite handy.

The same night after this conversation, Steve, Blackie, Flint and Ira all started to a dance which was to be held on Cole Creek at a school house a mile or so north of the Bradley Ranch. They rode hard so as to reach their destination before darkness set in, as the full moon on which they had relied to light their way was likely to be completely obscured by the heavy, ink-black clouds which hung menacingly in the south.

They reached the school house about eight o'clock and already the sound of scraping fiddles and stamping feet proclaimed that the dance was in progress. Through the open windows and door could be heard the noise made by many feet shuffling and rasping over the sand shaken off the rough boots and shoes to the rough and knotty, soft pine floor. Figures moved in and out through the mazes of a waltz, having learned from much practice to step lightly over the splinters and cracks which would have been fatal to the uninitiated. The light streaming out penciled the gloom, and revealed many saddle horses hitched to the fence, or turned loose to crop the short grass inside the yard, while here and there a light buggy or wagon indicated that there were enough girls and women present to insure the dance being a success.

At intervals as they had ridden along the gentle stillness of the night had been broken by distant rumblings of thunder, followed by zigzag streaks of lightning, shooting downward to the southern horizon. As the boys were tying their horses this culminated in a sudden blinding flash which seemingly rent the clouds apart, and sent the contents of some heavenly reservoir pouring upon the earth. Only the northern fringe of the cloud passed over their heads, but the rain came down in columns which, carried by the wind, beat

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against the house like water flowing over a fall. There was a quick letting down of windows, and the united strength of two men closed the door upon the blast. The horses humped up and with heads pointed toward the earth leant back against the storm, their tails and manes whipped about by the wind.

The musicians bent farther over their instruments, and strove to be heard above the crash of thunder and steady beat of the rain. So the hilarious progress of the dance was in no wise lessened, for two or three strangers who had come out from Denver thoughtfully brought along several bottles, which they generously passed around in the shelter of the cloak room.

As suddenly as it started the rain stopped about midnight. Shortly afterward some one called Blackie outside and he and the strangers disappeared and could not be found when the other boys were ready to start a couple of hours later. The clouds had cleared away and the moon was shining in all its brilliant promise, lighting up the prairie almost like day.

The tough little bronchos were galloping along in steady, even strides, making but slight sound as their feet sank in the softened earth, when Steve abruptly wheeled his horse and started back over the trail they had come.

"What-you-may-call-it-in-there, where are you goin'?" stuttered Flint, who was almost inarticulate from his frequent libations of the evening.

By this time Steve was leaning far over in his saddle closely studying the ground as he rode diagonally to the way they had come. The other cowboys halted, some eight or ten in number, and rode back to see what Steve had found.

"What's the matter?" inquired they as they came up.

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"Looks like somebody has been driving cattle along here since the rain. Here are a lot of tracks."

"Maybe it's a bunch goin' to the creek for water," observed one.

"No, I see a horse's track," objected Steve, who had dismounted and was scrutinizing the ground more closely.

"Here's another track on this side," said Ira. "There are three horses altogether, and one is shod."

"Yes and they are headed straight for the Bradley Ranch. If they was goin' in any other direction I wouldn't think anything about it, but it might be worth while for us to follow it up."

"Come on," shouted the others, starting off. They had all drunk just enough to make them ready for any adventure, no matter how reckless.

"Hold on," called Steve. "This is no picnic. If we are goin' after cattle thieves we have got to be more careful. And before we go any farther we had better examine our guns and see if they are loaded."

At this they all gathered around, and somewhat sobered at Steve's serious tone, began to break their revolvers, and reload. Some borrowing cartridges from those whose belts were more plentifully stocked than their own. At last they were all ready and started out, following the trail of the cattle, which was plainly marked and went straight toward the Cole Creek ranch.

"They are sure gettin' bold to drive these cattle straight to the ranch, right after a rain, on the very night when there was a dance at the school house, and some of the crowd would be sure to cross it," observed Fred.

"I guess they thought we would all be too drunk to notice it," remarked Ira, succinctly. "Looks like there are some calves in the bunch. Guess some more

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of Bradley's cows will come out with twins to-morrow."

"What does he do with the cattle?" inquired Flint.

"He must kill them and haul them in to Denver, as none of his bunch show any blotched brands. He takes a lot of beef to town, and I think——. But what it was, Steve thought was lost in a sudden roaring, swishing sound of rushing waters. Upon looking up as they were about to cross the creek, the startled cowboys could dimly see through the thick shadows cast by the cottonwood trees a high wall of water bearing down upon them.

"Hurry," shouted Steve to his followers. "There's been a cloudburst up stream, and a flood is comin' down the creek. We can make it if we get a move on." Spurring their horses they scurried across with so little time to spare that the oncoming wave caught the last horse and swept him around as he was clambering up the steep, high bank above. His nimble rider lightly sprang over his head and, holding onto the reins, enabled him to secure a footing and make his way to safety.

Fortunately they came out on a high bluff, otherwise they would have been carried down with the flood, for as they stood looking back at the peril from which they had so narrowly escaped they could see from the moonlight gleaming on the water that the low meadow land on the other side was already covered.

At a sign from Steve, whom they had instinctively chosen as their leader, they rode silently on their way. The crashing of falling trees and the roar of the flood drowning all other sounds, and making speech impossible.

Faintly and then louder as they neared the ranch could be heard the sound of calves bawling. The cowboys rode up in the shadow of the corral where the

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calves were penned, tied their horses to a tree, loosened their pistols in their belts, and drew them around so as to be easier to get, and bending over, slowly but steadily crept around to the barn.

A ray of light penetrated through a chink in the rock foundation, and the sound of a muttered curse greeted their ears.

They slipped around to the barn door and opened it carefully, but the absence of light or sound, convinced them there must be an underground room.

Cautiously they made their way round the barn again, searching for an outside door to the cellar, but save for the little crack in the wall, which sent out a penciled ray of light, there appeared to be no other opening.

One after another tried to see what was going on inside by peering through the chink, but it did not seem to be favorably located to give them a view of the men or their occupation.

While the rest were striving to look in through the small opening in the wall, Steve and Ira went around to the other end, and from the many tracks leading to and from the corral they decided that they must have driven the cattle inside and killed them. Carefully opening the double doors they saw a rope dangling from a pulley above to an open trap door, while lying close by were three dead steers, ready to be lowered to the cellar below, where doubtless their comrades were now being skinned.

Ira motioned for the rest to follow, which they did; the roar of the flood drowning what little sound they made walking over the moist earth.

From below could be heard the men busily skinning an animal and chatting away. Long immunity had made them careless of discovery, and one might have thought from the way they talked and discussed neigh-

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borhood gossip that they were following the most honest pursuit in the world.

With tense nerves and bated breath the cowboys gathered around the opening, and halting a moment, tried to determine from the conversation how many were beneath them. The creek boomed and tumbled nearby, and the rays of the moon came in at the open door, lighting up the dark interior.

Scorning the stairway as being too slow a mode of approach, Steve was about to swing himself down when a rooster perched on a beam behind them awoke with surprise at the bright light streaming in and evidently thinking that he had overslept, hastily stretched himself, and a shrill cock-a-doodle-doo rent the air as he sent out his clarion announcement of the dawn.

Flint jumped and dropped his gun with a clatter, and the startled cowboys, galvanized into sudden action, tumbled pell mell through the hole after Steve, who had swung himself down immediately with the crash of the falling gun.

As he landed he saw a foot swing out and kick over a lantern which dimly lighted the low vault-like room. The light flared up and flickering a moment went out, but that momentary flash revealed three frightened men straightening up from over an animal which they had been skinning. To one side were two other beeves, already dressed and suspended from a joist overhead to cool.

Thick, impenetrable darkness now enveloped them like a wall. The cowboys picked themselves up and closed in around Steve. Momentarily expecting an attack they breathlessly waited, every sense on the alert. The silence was so great they could hear a watch in Ira's pocket busily ticking off the seconds, and every second seemed an age.

Presently from the other side of the room could be

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heard a vague sound as of some one tugging and pulling at a heavy object. Thinking they were trying to make a barricade of the dead animals two cowboys stationed themselves so as to guard the stairway, while the rest with drawn revolvers began to stealthily creep through the darkness.

Quietly they made their way for a few steps, and then without warning, stumbled and fell headlong over the steer which they discovered still remained in the center of the room. Getting up they reached out gropingly, but found nothing but emptiness, or the blank dirt wall. They were feeling their way along this when Ira came to an open space, and thinking it might be a passage leading outside, peered in, but nothing but the same thick gloom met his view through which it was impossible to distinguish any object. Putting out his hand he started to enter and touched a rough, heavy door which swollen from the damp, and with hinges rusted from lack of use, was slowly being forced shut by an unseen hand.

Instantly throwing his weight against the door he wedged it open with his foot and shouted to his companions:

"Come here! They've gone out through a tunnel and are tryin' to close the door behind them." But with his cry a hand reached around the edge of the door and a long pointed knife pierced his shoulder; Ira flinched; the door went shut, and a large iron bar fell into place just as the cowboys brought their united weight against it.

The two who had been left to guard the stairway rushed to their assistance, and as Steve turned to brace himself better he saw a form appear in the trap door, darkly silhouetted against the moonlight streaming down. At first he thought it was one of the cowboys going for a pole to use as a battering ram, but as the fig-

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ure dashed up the stairs the true situation burst upon him.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "They've tricked us. There goes one up the stairs." With two leaps he was at the top of the stair, and darting to the door, saw a man crouched low, and running across the corral to where the horses were tied.

Vaulting over, the runner whipped out a knife, cut the reins of the nearest horse, swung himself into the saddle and galloped away up the creek, just as Steve jumped over the fence after him. Not having a knife precious moments were lost in untying his horse, but once in the saddle he gained steadily on the fugitive, who, seeing his plight, rode his horse toward the creek, and attempted to force him into the whirling torrent. But the beast snorted, and stood stubbornly on the bank, unmindful alike of whip and spur. He knew that the threat which lurked in the voice of the flood was no idle jest, while the oncoming horse was only one of his comrades, and carried no menace for him personally. His instincts warned him that his rider was urged on by some desperate fear, and had need of haste, but they also told him that he was one of those unfortunates who never received voluntary love or obedience from either man or beast. They did his will it is true, but only when they must, and it was self-interest, fear or hatred that prompted them.

But the man had cunning, and apparently yielding the point, turned and rode out across the prairie, his pursuer hot on his trail, and when the horse had warmed to the race, with infinite craft circled and again rode toward the creek. This time when he reached the edge the horse had too much impetus to stop, and with a wide spring landed far out in the swirling stream.

The water was almost to the top of the bank from

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which he jumped and close by the current was running swift and strong. Bravely he struggled, the hoarse voice of his rider urging him on with curse and shout, until the seething current caught and rolled him over and over, in a mad race down stream.

Steve made ready his lariat as he galloped up, and paused a moment before throwing it, closely scanning the surface of the water, trying in the dim light to distinguish the man from the floating driftwood. Thinking he must have been carried farther down he was about to ride along the bank when he saw a dark object appear and a hand reach up and clutch at a limb as it was swept past a tree.

Shouting to attract the drowning man's attention, Steve threw his rope, and the loop settled over him, but before he could tighten it up the undertow drew him beneath the surface.

Quickly recoiling his rope he threw it again, and caught him by the head and shoulders the next time he was cast up by the churning water, and riding inland, dragged him to shore.

Seeing that he made no effort to rise, Steve dismounted, pulled him a little farther upon the bank, and then turned him over to see whom he had rescued. But the moon hid behind a cloud for a moment as if ashamed of the revelation it was about to make. Slowly the clouds drifted onward, the moonlight filtered through the leaves, and when the man's face lay revealed, Steve sprang back with a cry of horror, hardly able to believe the evidence of his eyes.

Choking and coughing, the half-drowned man stumbled up and made Steve an ironic bow.

"*Bon matin, mon frere,*" said he with a sardonic grin. "It gives me great pleasure to see you."

"Well, it don't give me great pleasure to see you," answered Steve. "If I'd known it was you I'd a let you

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drown, for that would be a much better end than the hangin' you'll get as soon as the other boys come up."

"You'll stand by and let them hang me, I suppose, and glad of the chance. Maybe you'll pull the rope," said Blackie with a sneer. "You are a great brother."

"No, I'll not pull the rope, but you would if it was me. If they find you here they'll not ask me any odds, but'll string you up to the nearest tree. For I'll not take sides with a cattle thief, even if he is my brother, which you are not, when it comes right down to the point, although this is the first time anybody has ever reminded you of it. We have been brought up as brothers, and you've had the same chances as I've had, but it seems to have done you little good. So far I've always stood by you, but you've started on a trail that I don't care to travel, an' you'll have to go it alone."

At this, Blackie, who had considered himself safe ever since he had recognized Steve's voice when he shouted to him, lost some of his jauntiness, and a look of fear crept into his face in spite of his attempt at bravado.

"Well, let's not let them find me here, then. All you have to do is to ride back and tell them that the man you was chasin' tried to cross the creek and was drowned. That won't be hard for them to believe the way the creek is now, an' I'll make a get-a-way. You might give me one more chance, anyway," said he, and with a searching glance at Steve he remarked suggestively. "I've a neat little sum saved up, an' we'll go halves."

"Shut up! You damned thief. I don't want any of your dirty money. If I help you to get away, and keep still, it will be for the sake of our father and mother, and the family that will be disgraced if they hang you, as you deserve. But before I do anything, you've got

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to promise right here to quit rustlin' for good, or I'll leave you to take your medicine."

"I'll promise, all right," said Blackie hurriedly. "I always heard there was honor among thieves, but them damned cowards never even told me they had a tunnel, or I wouldn't a been caught. You get me out of this, and I'll never mix with that bunch again."

While they had been talking the horse Blackie had been riding was carried down stream, and coming to a place where the creek made a bend and formed a sand-bar, found the current less swift and swam out. Then like some person who has narrowly escaped death, and thankful to be alive, seeks the society of his fellow-men, he trotted up and began nosing Steve's horse in friendly sympathy.

"By Gee, there's the horse I was ridin'," said Blackie, and running to him, mounted and galloped away, leaving Steve gazing after him with a look in which relief and amazement mingled.

"Well, if he ain't the lucky one," said Steve. "I was just wonderin' how I was to get him away from here." With that he mounted his horse, and rode back to the ranch.

When he arrived he found the other boys just ready to mount and start on the trail of the rustlers, whom they judged had ridden toward Denver, having made their escape while the door to the tunnel was being broken down. This took some time as it was made of heavy boards, reinforced across the back by willow poles about the size of a man's arm, and all held shut by three iron bars. It took time to find the ax and hew a way through this, and when they had done so and cautiously entered, they found nothing but the empty passage, which ended in an old dry well back of a shed. A large bucket suspended from a pulley, disclosed their means of reaching the surface, while a

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half-filled manger denoted the presence of horses that had evidently enabled them to make good their escape.

Before leaving they went to the house, which during all the excitement had shown no life, and getting no response to their repeated knocking, they opened the door and went in, only to find the place deserted. From the disorder all over the house it looked like the men had been keeping bachelor's camp for some time, as Bradley's wife was known to be scrupulously neat in her housekeeping.

While the rest were examining the house, Steve went into the barn and finding Blackie's horse tied in one of the stalls, unsaddled it, hid the saddle under some hay in the loft, and turned the horse loose on the range.

The moon went down, and the thick darkness that precedes the dawn, settled over the earth just as the cowboys started out to scour the country in search of the fugitives. From the neighbors they learned that Bradley and his wife were supposed to be on a visit somewhere in the East, and it must have been some other members of the gang whom they had surprised.

People along the road to Denver had been aroused in the early morning by their dogs barking, and had heard the sound of galloping horses, but further than that nothing was learned as to who the rustlers were.

Bradley returned from the East in a few days, and was arrested as he stepped off the train, but when his trial came up he produced an alibi which secured his release for the time, although every one was sure he was the leader of the gang, even if he had not been mixed up in that particular event.

Several of his cronies were suspected, but there was not enough proof to warrant their arrest, so the people very reluctantly dropped the case for the time.

The beeves that had been butchered were turned over

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to their respective owners as indicated by the brands which they bore, and Bradley very wisely returned to the East for an indefinite visit.

Blackie had the wisdom to ride straight home, and turned the horse, on which he made his escape, loose to stray home. It was the one Ira had ridden to the dance, and Walter Milton found it a day or so later with a bunch of range stock. Everybody supposed it had swam the creek, and there was much speculation as to what had become of the rider, but as no one was missing in the neighborhood, and no dead body had been found along the creek, it was decided that whoever it was must have by some chance been saved from drowning. No one thought of connecting Blackie with the case, and Steve hoped that the scare he had received would serve as a warning to him in future, but knowing how untamable was his spirit, he was much afraid that it would not be effective.

With nothing to feed upon the excitement soon died down, and after a time Bradley judging rightly the tolerant attitude of the Westerner, returned with his wife and settled into the usual routine of life. But it was noticed that not so many fat steers disappeared off the range as before.

VIII

MISS PARKER MAKES A PIE

One morning about the first of August, Ned and Marcia determined to go after some of their beef steers that had strayed off the range and which a cowboy who passed the day before had told them were about twenty miles east.

As it was a long ride Miss Parker decided to stay at home and write some letters. That was the only task she had set for herself while in the West, to write long and interesting letters to her many friends, some of whom she did not find time to write more than once a year.

Collecting her writing materials and a couple of cushions she soon had herself comfortably ensconced in a hammock which swung between two enormous cottonwood trees south of the house, and commanded a view of the gate.

She was interrupted in the midst of the first letter by the clattering of hoofs on the dry, hard road, and presently an opening in the trees disclosed to view a short, stocky figure on a little roan pony, bouncing up and down with every step of the horse, his tow-colored hair flying in the breeze. He drew rein and called out:

"Hello, led dy! Me bane Yon Yonson. Me little

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poy youst got a bane his nose oop. My vife youst tell me—go get Mrs. Alton. You tell her—hein?”

Hardly able to restrain her laughter at his queer dialect Miss Parker went to look for Mrs. Alton, who came out and made inquiries as to what had now happened to the “Calamity Danes,” as Ned had long ago dubbed them. She was used to such calls for some one of their numerous brood of clumsy and awkward children, in their efforts to overcome the handicap of heredity and become cowpunchers and broncho-busters, were always getting hurt, and then would send post haste for Mrs. Alton.

The little Danish boys made valient efforts, but they did not take kindly to the saddle, as they came from a long line of peasant ancestry, who had been their own beasts of burden for centuries.

The horse in the old countries is the dearly prized possession of the rich. Even now the father never thought of saddling a horse when he wished to drive in the milk cows, or head a refractory animal about his ranch. He would simply set out on foot and run so fast that his feet could hardly be seen to touch the ground, but seemed to be twinkling along in the air.

So the children had a hard time of trying to acquire that oneness of horse and man that seemed to be the natural inheritance of the other plains-born children. As a result Mrs. Alton had become sort of an emergency surgeon. Setting broken limbs, sewing up cuts, and otherwise coming to the rescuce, when the little two-year-old Mollie decided that a rattle snake was a suitable top, or the baby had a bane his nose oop as in the present instance.

Telling the man to drive up Little Don, and saddle him for her, she went off to put on her riding habit. For, in spite of her age and white hair, she still rode horseback when in a hurry, as in that way one could

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frequently make short cuts across the country, where a buggy would have to make long detours to find a safe crossing through the many gulches.

She was soon ready and they started off, leaving Miss Parker at the ranch with now only the old grandad for company.

Delighted at the prospect of a long quiet day at letter writing, she made an energetic beginning, but, alas, for good intentions. Perhaps she had not recovered from the effects of the dance she had attended a few nights before, or it may have been the unusual quiet of the ranch coupled with the warmth of the day, anyway, in a few minutes she was fast asleep.

And while she slept on undisturbed in the cool shade of the trees, lulled by the gentle breeze which fanned her cheeks, three dusty, tired cowboys cheerfully rode four or five miles out of their way through the broiling hot sun, just to pass the ranch and give her greeting.

The Alton Ranch had always been a favorite stopping place, but since Miss Parker's arrival it had become more popular than ever. The cowboys seemed to think that no matter where they were going the nearest way was by the Alton Ranch, and Ned said that "if all the stray cattle and horses that were searched for in that vicinity had been there they would have stampeeded some night and tore down the whole dang place."

It became such a joke that, after a time, they would ask every cowboy that came along if he was hunting strays. Most of them were too bashful to do more than gaze from afar, and stammer "Yes, ma'am," and "No ma'am," if addressed by Miss Parker, but this was not true of Steve, who paid open court to the lady, and made frequent trips to the Alton Ranch, happening along at any time.

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And so it was to-day. He rode up, accompanied by Ira and Billie, and so deep were Miss Parker's slumbers that the noise made by the three horsemen galloping up to the ranch did not awaken her.

They dismounted, threw the rein over their horses' heads and entered the gate. Spying Miss Parker lying in the hammock asleep they mischievously stole up and quietly seated themselves tailor fashion on the ground in front of her.

She made a beautiful picture as she reclined among the cushions, her cheeks flushed by sleep, and wisps of black hair blown about by the wind. One slender, white arm, from off which the loose sleeve had fallen, was bent up over her head, partially shielding her eyes from the light. Behind her was a thick hedge of tame current bushes, laden with scarlet fruit, and formed a suitable background for the girl's rich coloring.

The whole made a scene in marked contrast to the bare and treeless plains over which they had come, already being turned brown by the unusual heat and drouth. So it is no wonder that the fixed gaze of three pair of fascinated eyes soon aroused her, and with a startled exclamation she sat up, scattering papers and letters in every direction.

Steve, fearing that she might be offended at their seeming familiarity, very respectfully apologized, saying in extenuation: "You made such a pretty picture that we did not like to wake you, for fear you might be a vision and disappear."

"Well, if that is the case," answered she, "I suppose I shall have to forgive you, but since I am really flesh and blood as you see, will you please pick up my letters, which the wind is trying to carry out on the prairie to amuse the coyotes?"

They all began collecting the scattered letters, and Steve after chasing one elusive missive about the yard,

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was rewarded for his trouble by seeing at the bottom, the closing salutation of, "Lovingly yours, Jack."

"Loving yours, Jack," mused he, as he returned it to her. "Who is Jack, and what class is he in? Is he one of the 'Also ran,' the 'Has beens' or 'Goin' to be'?"

"I don't know," answered Miss Parker, laughing. "I have not classified him as yet. What one should you suggest?"

"Well, I don't know what one he's in now, but I know where he's goin' to be. I'm never goin' to stop until him and all the rest are in the discard, and me on the winnin' side, well past the judge's stand when the rope falls."

"Indeed," mused Miss Parker. "Methinks I have heard those words before, or something to that effect, spoken quite as confidently as you have uttered them. But as Utah only allows to men the privilege of more than one spouse, I do not see how they are all going to win do you? Unless I should found a new Sect giving women the same prerogatives the Mormons enjoy."

"I have often thought it might not be a bad plan, as most of the married men I know are so engrossed in making money that they have no time for companionship with their wives, who are forced to sit alone of evenings and amuse themselves during the day by spending money, attending woman's clubs or going to the matinee, with never a man on the horizon anywhere."

"So, instead of allowing a man more than one wife, the women should be allowed two husbands. One to support her, and the other to amuse her."

"Well, that might be necessary in the cities," objected Steve. "But out here the women amuse themselves by lookin' after the house and children, and

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whenever there is anything goin' on, they all go together."

"That's so," agreed Billie. "But you have neglected to mention one of the ways the women out here have of amusin' themselves, and that is 'cookin'."

"Tryin' to follow all this lofty conversation between you two is awful fatiguin' and I don't believe I'll be able to stand much more of it without something to eat anyway. Of course, I ain't hintin', but did any of you ever eat a currant pie? I've looked at them currants until I can just tell what a currant pie'd taste like."

"I'm bettin' that Miss Parker can make the best currant pie you ever eat," said Ira.

"You must have a good imagination, Ira, if you can tell what a pie I made would taste like. The only pies I ever made were composed of a judicious mixture of clay and water and baked in the sun."

"I am like the man from Missouri," said Steve, "and will have to be shown. Come on, boys, let's get some buckets and pick some."

At this Miss Parker was in a quandary, and going in the house appealed to the old man.

"Grandad, what must I do? Here are all these hungry men clammoring for pie, and I don't know how to make one."

"I don't know," answered Mr. Alton. "Maybe you can find out from the cook book. There ought to be one around somewhere. You surely will have to try, as all the women out here can make pies, and these boys naturally think you ought to make better pies than anybody else, judgin' by the way you do other things."

"They won't hardly understand you not bein' able to make pies. I surely think every girl ought to number pie makin' among her accomplishments, for when the courtin' days is over, and the minister is done sayin' his little speech, the honeymoon lasts longer if the girl

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knows how to make her home and husband comfortable. And that is true, be they rich or poor. I heard what you said about foundin' a new sect for women. Maybe them women you know wouldn't have to spend so much time alone if they knew more about makin' a home, and that don't mean that they all would need to cook or wash dishes either. But a little knowledge of that wouldn't hurt any of them." And with that he tottered out to the kitchen behind Miss Parker to see the fun, just as the boys came in with a bucketful of berries.

"Well, if you men will promise to eat what I make, I'll try and concoct a pie. It cannot taste very badly made out of these lovely currants."

"Let me see," pondered she. "I am always reading Mrs. Rose's Household Hints in the Woman's Hope Companion, but all I can remember about making pie crust is that you put in lots of lard, a little water, and do not kneed it very much, and then roll it out on a marble slab. That settles it. I can not make it as we have no marble slab on which to roll it out."

"Oh, roll it out on the table, or on the floor. We don't care," said Ira.

"Marble slab," said Steve. "Now where did I see a marble slab?"

"The only one I ever saw in this country," said Billie, "is a flat stone at the head of a grave inside that little picket fence at Johnnie Rice's place, where we planted that fellow we found frozen to death in your claim shack two or three years ago."

"You go ahead and mix the dough," chuckled Steve, "and I'll furnish the slab."

"Now, where has he gone?" inquired Miss Parker. "To get the headstone?"

"I dont' know," said Billie. "Steve is usually equal to any emergency."

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"Well, I guess if you said you wanted it, some of 'em would get it for you," observed Grandad. "So far you have a sample of about everything the plains produce. Rattlesnake skins, horn toads, magpies, Indian arrows, an' I don't know what all. You only need a tombstone to complete the list. The other day while you was gone that crazy Flint rode up, half leadin' and half draggin' a live coyote by his lariat, which he said he was bringin' to you. I told him to shoot the dumbest thing. I ain't a goin' to have it around here eatin' up all the chickens and snappin' at everybody.

"I don't mind turnin' the place into a museum as long as they bring harmless sort of things, but I draw the line at live coyotes and rattlesnakes."

There was a sound in the next room of something falling and a loud crash, but before they could go to see what had happened, Steve came out carrying the marble top off an old walnut dresser.

"Well, I'll be dumbest," exclaimed Grandad. "Did you break that dresser. I've had that for forty years."

"No, I just knocked the lamp off and broke the chimney."

"Come on, Miss Parker," called Billie. "Here's your marble slab, so you've no excuse now."

"Go ahead," encouraged Ira. "And we'll all help. Here, Billie, you get some flour. I'll get the lard, and Steve you get the sugar."

"All right," assented Steve. "Where do they keep the sugar, Grandad?"

"I don't know. They ought to be some up here, but if they ain't, they's a sack down cellar," answered the old man.

Finally all the ingredients were collected and they all sat around to watch Miss Parker make the pie, and that was enough to embarrass even an experienced

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cook. The old man seeing her confusion came to the rescue by saying:

"Ain't you fellows goin' to have anything but pie for dinner? While Miss Parker is makin' it, you had better get some meat and peel some potatoes."

Miss Parker was naturally deft with her hands, and the long slender fingers that wielded the brush and pencil so cleverly were equally as deft as she kneaded the dough, covered the pan, and at last daintily pinched the edges together, the way she had seen Aunt Mathilda, their old colored cook, finish off her pies.

When she had put in the berries she started to pour in the whole cup of sugar, when Steve stopped her with a laugh.

"What is the matter?" inquired she.

"Ain't you puttin' in too much sugar?"

"I do not know. It must take a lot. I read once that the way to make gooseberry pie was to put in sugar as long as your conscience would allow you, and then shut your eyes and throw it in with both hands as fast as you could. And I believe that currants have even more acid than gooseberries."

"Well, just put in a little, and if it not sweet enough we can put in more. It won't take so much if you make the pie, you know," suggested Billie.

At last the pie was ready. Billie had the potatoes on cooking; Ira cut the meat, and Steve made the coffee. They all united and set the table, and helped take up the dinner. The pie was set out to cool, while they ate, and when they were ready Miss Parker hunted up some plates to put it on, and soon everybody was served.

Steve put rather a generous piece in his mouth, and then looking around rather startled, swallowed it at one gulp, and hastily took a drink of water. Then he quizzically watched Ira and Billie while they ate some of

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theirs. They each took a bite, swallowed quickly, and then looked at Steve, waiting until Miss Parker should take a piece of her's, and when she had, there was a general explosion. Steve had made a mistake when he went after the sugar and dipped into the salt sack.

IX

COYOTE CHASE

After dinner was over, Ira and Billie reluctantly took their departure, and Steve suggested to Miss Parker that they take the dogs and go for a coyote chase. To this she readily consented as so far they had not been able to find a coyote on any of their trips. At night their nervous yapping kept her awake, but by day they kept out of sight through respect for the pack of hounds, whom they had learned to fear.

While Steve was saddling a horse for her to ride, she went in and put on her riding habit and boots, and calling the dogs they were soon on their way. The pack consisted of seven black and white-spotted gray hounds. Only four of them came in answer to their repeated calls, and these were old Nick and Bettie and their two sprightly offsprings who were now old enough to be initiated into the mysteries of the chase, but were too young to be of much assistance in killing a coyote.

One or the other of them was constantly breaking away from the pack to chase a prairie dog, which would entice them on by sitting on the edge of its den and emitting its saucy little weau, weau, weau, each time jerking down its flat, stubby tail like a toy dog. When the pup was just upon it, with one tantalizing squeak it would duck into the hole.

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Every now and then as they rode along they would come across a clumsy, ungainly horn toad, which increased its awkward gait as it hurried out of the way. While the little sand lizards, trusting in their extra swiftness, would scurry along ahead of the horses for a space, and then as if giving up the race, would scramble up the sides of the path, often just in time to avoid being stepped upon.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Miss Parker. "To look at the plains, one would think them as barren of life as they are of vegetation, but everywhere one finds creeping, crawling things, all of the same yellow, brownish tint of the grass and earth. My horse nearly stepped on that little wiggly thing just now, and look there! What is the matter with that bird?"

"Well, I call that grit," said Steve. "See that rattler slidin' off there. It's been after her nest, and she has been tryin' to drive it away."

"Hold your horse. I am goin' to shoot it," saying which he whipped out his revolver, there was a quick report, and a spat of dust which the bullet kicked up as it went into the ground, after passing through the snake about half way down its sinuous length. Another shot tore its head to pieces.

"How can you hit things like that? You don't seem to take any aim."

"Oh, I don't know," answered Steve, somewhat embarrassed. "I guess it is a good deal like playin' ball. Your eye follows the ball, and your hands take the right position to catch it."

"I believe the bird is hurt. See how she flutters along."

"I guess she is just playin' off, trying to draw our attention away from her nest which ought to be somewhere near."

"Yes, there it is behind that little weed, with four

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young ones in it. Ain't they ugly little things with their mouths spread open like that? They don't look like they was worth makin' such a fuss over, do they?"

"No," answered Miss Parker, laughing. "But I have seen people who were just as foolish.

"I remember one time when I was a little girl going with some other children to view a new baby. The proud young mother was holding it on her lap, and we all gathered around her. The other children with much tact immediately began exclaiming about how pretty and sweet it was. It had an unusually thick head of dark hair for a young baby, and as it lay there waving its tiny hands and puckering up its little red face, it reminded me of the monkey belonging to the old organ grinder who used to pass our house every day.

"The baby's father was standing near, and seeing that I did not seem as enthusiastic as the others, very foolishly asked me if I didn't think it was pretty, and I bluntly answered 'No.'

"I never shall forget his snort of contempt, and his remark that 'the little fool didn't know a pretty baby when she saw one.' The other children looked at me with horror. I resolved that I would never make that mistake again. So the next time I happened to be where there was a little baby, and was invited up to its crib to see it, although it was screeching at the top of its lungs, I mustered up what enthusiasm I could, and said: 'It is very pretty.'

"Its parents seemed to have a sense of humor, and shouted with laughter at my saying the baby was pretty when it was crying."

"I should have thought you would have been rather discouraged after that," said Steve, chuckling.

They had been riding up a gentle slope, and just then reached the top, which was the highest point for miles around and gave a commanding view of the

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whole surrounding country. All about spread the prairie, cut here and there by gulches, which converted its surface into rolling undulating mounds or hills, while to the west, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the purple, snow-capped mountains, standing stiff against the sky. The tallest peaks piercing the clouds and glistening in the sun above them.

Miss Parker stopped her horse, and turning slowly, let her gaze travel from one far horizon to another, and then back over the vastness that intervened. There was nothing to mar the view. Here and there a gray speck marked the sight of some ranch, and tucked away in the valleys where the creeks ran, were patches of dark green meadow lands, but for the most part there was nothing but the bare, brown prairie, sweeping on and on, ever coaxing the eye to greater reaches of vision. A light wind was blowing from the west, coming fresh and resonant from the snow and pines of the mountains.

Miss Parker drew a long breath of the pure, cool air, and exclaimed:

"Oh! I love this country.

"I do not believe that you people who have grown up in the midst of these rolling prairies and in sight of those majestic mountains can imagine what impression they make on a person who has lived in a crowded city like New York.

"I believe there are thousands of people who live and die there, without ever seeing a sunrise or sunset. For all they see of the sun or moon, their days and nights, might be caused by turning on or off of the electric lights.

"In the suburbs it is not so bad. There they have nice shady streets and green lawns, but in the city proper there are nothing but narrow, tunnel-like

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streets, walled on either side by hideous brownstone houses. Each just like the other.

"The atmosphere is laden with moisture collected from the sea and rivers, which in winter bites and stings the hands and face like taking a plunge into ice-cold water. But it is even worse in summer. Then it becomes a suffocating blanket through which the people gasp and struggle for breath.

"I am afraid this trip has spoiled me, and I will be like a bird in a cage, pining for the freedom of which I have had a glimpse."

"Well, I sure feel a heap encouraged since hearin' that speech. With the country standin' ace high, I ought to win in a walk, without your goin' to Utah and roundin' that new Sect for females you was talkin' about to-day."

"Dear me, have you been discouraged?" said she in a mocking tone. "I hadn't observed it."

"Oh, there have been times when I have been a little anxious, but I don't worry much since Reggie went back. While he was here I used to lay awake nights takin' inventories of myself and personal assets, and stackin' them up against Reggie and his millions, and I couldn't help admittin' to myself that any right-minded girl ought to take the millions, even if Reggie was a heavy encumbrance, but I kept hopin' all the time that you wouldn't."

"And now since he has gone, you have no more anxiety, I suppose," said she a little nettled at his assurance.

"I guess I have enough discomfort to please you if you knew all about it. Most girls can cause a man that, even *if* there ain't much competition. They'll keep 'em *on* the anxious seat just the same."

"And wise is the maiden who prolongs their agony as long as possible, for when a man has won a for-

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tune, he spends much time and thought in an effort to keep it, but when he has won a woman he considers the matter settled for life. To him courting is like reading an interesting book, both are all absorbing until finished; while to a woman, loving words are always the greatest treasures of her heart. Moral—A girl should never marry while yet young enough to be wooed." And with a laughing challenge at Steve she set her horse into a gallop and rode at a breakneck pace down the hill. The dogs with their long, easy lope keeping alongside the horses, and as they looked up at her their open mouths and lolling tongues gave the impression that they were joining in her mirth.

Just as she was about to call Steve's attention to it, Nick and Bettie pricked up their ears, and with a significant look at the pups, quietly slipped around the head of a little draw, and came full upon a mother coyote and her five little cubs chasing each other in a spirited game of tag.

The mother upon seeing the dogs gave an imperative yap of command, and the cubs without stopping to see what had caused this sudden interruption in their play, scuttled to safety in the den, at the other end of the valley. All but one, who had in an attempt to elude its playfellow, made a wider detour than usual, and when the dogs appeared it was directly in their path.

The mother seeing its peril and heedless of her own safety, with reckless devotion, ran between them and the cub. Her ruse was successful, as she came so close to old Nick's nose that he forgot all about the little one, and making a quick turn, was right at her heels; Bettie and the two pups strung out behind, and away they went down the gulch; up the hill, circling over the prairie; now out of sight in some gulley, only to reappear in a few minutes on another hill.

It was a splendidly matched race, neither the dog

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nor the coyote seeming to gain on the other. Bettie and the pups by this time were far in the rear.

Ordinarily, old Nick would have made short work of a coyote that had no more of a start, but this one was in unusually good condition.

Long ago, she had acquired an appetite for young and tender veal, which other seasons could only occasionally be gratified, but this summer she had feasted to satiation. Many a startled Jack and cottontail had bounded off before her approach, only to stop in surprised uncertainty at her non-pursuit.

There had been little rainfall that summer, so that the cows with their lusty offspring making incessant demands upon them were forced to stray far from water, in order to find good grazing places. Too far for the little calves to make the trip during the heat of the day.

Now this wary old coyote knew this. When a cow would carefully hide her little one in some hollow, or between thick bunches of soap weeds, and hurry away to quench her thirst, the sneaking old marauder, who had watched her departure from some safe covert, would steal upon the helpless, sprawling victim, make a quick meal, and steal away before the mother's return. Well knowing that in her rage and grief she would wreck a swift vengeance with her long sharp horns.

But now retribution was fast approaching. In vain did she strain her exhausted muscles in greater effort. Old Nick with his long bounding leaps was gradually lessening the distance between them, and at last stretching himself in a mighty leap, he shot forward, clutched her by the neck with his sharp fangs, and with a dexterous twist, threw her over and over.

She was quickly up, and turned at bay, ears flattened back and yellow eyes gleaming. Old Nick mak-

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ing feints of attack to keep her interested until Bettie and the pups came up, as he well knew that if he gave battle without their assistance, it would be very costly to him, even though he should come off victorious.

When they arrived, he, deftly evading her snapping fangs, made a grab for her throat and the pups getting as far from the danger zone as possible, each took ahold of a hind leg and ground it between their crunching jaws.

The horses caught the enthusiasm of the chase and Miss Parker and Steve were in at the death. All the pleasure of the chase now gave place to pity for the lifeless form which the dogs were wooling so savagely. Asking Steve to call them, Miss Parker was glad to start homeward, vowing never again to be a party to such a slaughter.

When they arrived at the ranch, Steve after helping Miss Parker to dismount, said: "I do not believe I will go in as I am expecting some cattle buyers to be at the ranch to-morrow morning, and if Marcia and Ned urged me to stay, I don't believe I would be able to tear myself away. It is hard enough as it is."

"But it is going to rain," objected Miss Parker.

"Well, it has been dry so long that it would almost have to drown me before I'd complain. There's goin' to be a dance at the hall on our ranch Saturday night, and I'd like mighty well to take you if you'd care to go."

"I will go if Marcia and Ned are going also."

"Well, they are goin'." They told me the other day that they would come. So I'll be after you." And then laying his arm upon his horse's neck, he leant his head upon it, concealing for an instant, the look of love and yearning which was expressed so openly in his eyes and face. Then mounting, he resolutely

COYOTE CHASE

turned his horse, and galloped away, just as the long promised rain began to fall.

"What became of Steve?" inquired Ned, as Miss Parker entered the house.

"Oh! He went up in a cloud, or at least it looked that way. The mist shut off my view, just as he was climbing that steep hill."

X

STEVE SELLS SOME CATTLE

Among the buyers of cattle and horses that traveled over the country were a number of Jews. It was an occupation that appealed strongly to their ideas of thrift and economy, as the isolated ranchers were not able to keep up with the changes in the market, so there was always the chance of buying the stock enough below the price to make quite a profit. Then, too, the hospitable Westerners would of course never think of charging them for board or horse feed, so if they did not make anything, it was costing them nothing to live.

Some of them had been buying over the same territory for years, and had gradually overcome much of the prejudice with which their race was held. Among these was one called DeDeck, who as he prospered, had answered the agonized appeal of his persecuted relatives in Russia and had brought them to America, singly or in pairs, until all his near relatives were here, and after them came the deluge of uncles and cousins.

The last to arrive was an old weatherbeaten, scraggly-whiskered Jew and his son Isaac. The latter, with the passion for learning which all Jews seem to possess, started at once to night school, and when he had somewhat mastered a working knowledge of English he began looking about for the quickest means of emas-

STEVE SELLS SOME CATTLE

sing the fortune of which he dreamed day and night. When he had by incredible economy and self-denial saved a hundred dollars he consulted DeDeck as to how he should invest it.

"Vy don' you by cattles?" inquired DeDeck. "You debosits you moneys mit de Commission House by vitch I do beesiness, und ven you py cattles you giff an order on dem, de same as by de bank. Ven dey see you are a goot judge of cattles and make moneys, dey will let you draw on dem for a little more den you haff on debosit. You ought to be a goot judge of cattles, you haff been raised by de countries in Russia."

So in pursuance of this plan Isaac and his father hunted up an old second-hand wagon and an ancient horse and started on their way. They had been buying for sometime, and it was they whom Steve was expecting.

Early the next morning after he was at the Alton Ranch, old Rosenbaum and Isaac drove up, and Steve went out and rounded up some old cows and beef steers, which he had previously driven down near the ranch to have them handy in case some buyer should come along. The old man stayed in the wagon as he was bent and crippled with rheumatism, and sent his son Isaac to do the dickering.

Isaac climbed down out of the wagon and ran around among the cattle to look them over, and they, unused to seeing a man on foot, watched him with round eyes, and now and then one of them would shake its head.

"Vat you wants for dose cattles, Shteve?" inquired Isaac.

"I'll take \$22 a head for the she stuff, and \$32 a head for the steers," answered Steve.

"Oy! oy! dot is too mooch. I giff you ninedeen tollars for de she stoof, and eight und twendy tollars for de shteers."

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"No, I can't do it," objected Steve. "The price I made you is the best I can do."

"Oy! oy! But the cows, dey are old, und make to die by de time dey go to de stock yards, un de shteers, dey are youst so thin as never vas. I pay you ninedeen tollars for de cows, und eight und twendy for de shteers, und take dem right now," coaxed Isaac.

"No, I won't do it. The price I made you is the lowest I will take," said Steve, and galloped off to bunch up the cattle again as they had begun to stray.

Isaac caught hold of his stirrup, and ran along beside the horse, saying: "I giff you ninedeen-fifty for de cows, and twendy-eight und fiefy for de shteers."

"You will have to go a little higher than that," answered Steve, chuckling as he rode a little faster, the nimble Isaac still sprinting along at his stirrup. Just then old Rosenbaum called Isaac, and after consulting for awhile, the latter ran across to head Steve off, but Steve saw him coming and turned his horse and galloped in the other direction. Isaac darted about among the cattle trying to catch him, but as soon as he would get near, Steve would pretend to see a cow or steer about to get away, and whirl his horse and ride off to head it.

The perspiration was streaming down Isaac's face, and his breath was coming in gasps, but with the persistence of his race in search of a bargain, he played tag with Steve around among the cattle, and whenever he was near enough, would shout some offer, such as:

"You cut out de old black und white cow, und de brindle shteer und I giff you more."

At last some of the cows began to get restless, and several times when Isaac had started in front of an old cow, she had tossed her head rather threateningly.

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Steve saw it, and called to him to be careful, but the Jew was too intent on his trade.

Finally the old red cow began to paw the ground, and the next time Isaac came near she made for him, and at last awake to his danger, he sprinted toward old Rosenbaum and the wagon, who shouted:

“Make yourself for to hurry, Isaac.”

But Isaac did not need any suggestions on speed. He was doing the best he knew, and was giving the old cow a good race. Steve was rocking in his saddle with laughter, but at the same time getting his rope ready to interfere in case he saw the cow was going to overtake the Jew, who the farther he ran, the faster he seemed to go, with the cow right at his heels, neck bowed, trying to gore the tails of his old, rusty frock coat, which were sticking straight out behind him.

With a final burst of speed he was about to make the wagon, when he stubbed his toe and fell; the old cow made a dive for him, Steve whirled the rope, and caught her round the horns. The trained cow pony settled back on his haunches, and the cow's head came up with a jerk, one horn thrust neatly through the seat of Isaac's pants, and there he hung suspended. Steve was laughing so that he could not do anything, but Isaac's trousers had seen much service, and the fabric was old and rotten. Gradually the rent made by the cow's horn began to widen, and at last ripped clear through; Isaac fell to the ground, and scrambled into the wagon.

Old Rosenbaum whipped up his horse and drove to the house, but by the time Steve arrived, Isaac had recovered some of his assurance and when Steve dismounted, he ran to him and falling upon his knees, hugged Steve around the legs, saying:

“You goot poy; you save my life; I giff you twendy tollars for de cows, und dirty tollars for de shteers.”

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"Well, you are grateful," exclaimed Steve. "I did not suppose anything would make a Sheeney loosen up that much. But you'll have to do better than that."

The Jews stayed around all day, and at last late in the afternoon they became discouraged and left. The next morning Steve was out riding and passed the Knox Ranch about ten miles east of "—G" Ranch. Ed Knox came out and inquired:

"Have you seen old Rosenbaum this morning? He just left here awhile ago, and the last I saw of him he was hittin' the high places for your place. He came over here last night and looked at our cattle, and haggled around trying to jew us down. Finally I got tired and gave him a good cussin', and told him I wouldn't sell them to him at any price, as Broadhurst was coming out in a few days to buy your cattle and mine too. So he became excited and said he was goin' over to buy your cattle before the other man arrived."

"Did they tell you about the cow chasin' Isaac?" inquired Steve.

"No, did she get him?" inquired Ed, delightedly.

"No, but she caught his pants. Didn't you see how she tore them?"

"Yes, I saw something was the matter. He borrowed a needle and thread to sew them up. Said he caught them on a fence."

At this Steve chuckled joyously, and said:

"I shore never saw anything to equal that Sheeney for runnin'. I believe if he'd had a half mile to go, that old cow wouldn't a been able to see him for dust. And then when she lifted him up with one horn through the seat of his pants, an' his arms and legs wavin' in the breeze I thought I'd die laughin'. Them pants was built for a man that weighed about two hundred and had a big bay window, and when the old cow caught up the slack in the seat, Isaac's legs shot out

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at the bottom, lookin' llike pipestems. It certainly was funny." And laughing at the remembrance, Steve turned his horse and remarked:

"Well, I guess I'd better hit the trail, if I want to catch Rosenbaum at the ranch. Think I'll just raise the price of them cattle one dollar a head. So long."

In the meantime the two Jews had returned to the "G" and Blackie came out to see them.

"Where's Shteeve?" inquired Isaac.

"Oh, he's off ridin' somewhere," answered Blackie. "What do you want?"

"Ve wants to get de cows und de shteers ve bought yesterday."

"He didn't say anything to me about selling you any cattle. How much did you pay for them?"

"Twendy tollars a head for de she stoof, und dirty tollars for de shteers."

"Are you sure you bought them for that?" asked Blackie. "I heard him refuse to sell them for that the other day."

"Oy! oy! sure. Ve puy dem for dot. Coom inside de house and ve pay you de moneys und you giff us a bill of sale, und ve vill shtart right away."

"I guess you will have to wait until Steve comes."

"Oy! ve puy dem all right. Ve vant to get to Denver to-day. You let us haff dem. Shteeve he let us haff dem for twendy tollars, but ve giff you twendy-one for de cows, und dirty-one for de shteers, if you let us haff dem right away."

"Humph, raisin' your own price. Now I know you never bought them, for if you had you would hang around here for a week rather than pay any more."

Just then Steve rode up, and the Jews nothing abashed at being caught, went up to him and tried to bluff him into letting them have the cattle at that price.

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"You sure have the nerve," angrily exclaimed Steve. "But you might as well not waste your time. I didn't sell you the cattle at that price, and what's more you can't buy them to-day at the price I offered them to you for yesterday. I want a dollar more per head, and if you don't want them at that price, you do not need to take them for I just received word that Broadhurst is coming out, and I would rather sell them to him anyway."

At this the Jews became very anxious, and as Steve acted more and more indifferent, they agreed to take them, and wrote out an order on the Brockwell Commission Company in Denver for the money. Steve helped them drive the cattle to the station and load them in the cars. The freight train was supposed to leave at 4 P. M., but as usual it was late, and upon inquiry Steve found that it would not be there until 2 A. M. next morning. He stayed around for awhile, and then began to think that the long wait, packed in the cars was liable to be pretty hard on the old cows. If any of them should die the Commission Company would not honor the order, so he decided to ride on into Denver, which was twenty-five miles away. He reached there about four o'clock and presented his order for payment.

"Where are the stock?" inquired Brockwell.

"They are not in yet."

"Well you wait until they come in, and then bring in the order and I will cash it."

"I don't know how soon the cattle will be in, and I have to get back home to-night," objected Steve. "It ain't nothing to me if they never get here. I sold them to old Rosenbaum, and it's up to him. All I want is my money. I don't care any more about the cattle, but if you don't pay me, I'll go out and stop the cattle."

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They paid me enough down that I can afford to take them back."

"How far out are they?" inquired Brockwell.

"Oh, they left our house early this morning, and ought to be able to make it to-day," answered Steve. Brockwell hesitatingly paid him, and when he had received the money, his anxiety to leave town suddenly vanished. The next morning he went down to the stock yards to see in what condition the cattle arrived. Something distracted his attention when they were unloaded and presently Isaac saw him and came running up, wringing his hands, and weeping.

"You tam poy, you sheeted me. I shtop payment of dot order. Von of dem tam shteers done make to break his laig, und von of de cows make to die lareatty. You iss von tam sheet."

"I didn't cheat you. I set my price and you paid it. I was going to cut out some of the worst stock, but when I found you trying to make Blackie let you have them for less than I offered to sell them to you for, I thought I would show you that I could play Sheeney tricks too.

XI

THE ACCIDENT

In a few days Ned and Marcia again went off on one of their long rides and Miss Parker remained at home. All day she wandered restlessly about the house, unable to settle herself to anything, so at last she decided she would go for a ride. So far she had never gone out alone, but she thought she knew the country well enough by this time to find her way without any difficulty.

Calling Flint, she asked him to saddle a horse for her. He looked rather doubtful for a moment, and then said:

"The horse you usually ride is lame, and there's nothin' here but Trixie that we keep to drive in the saddle horses and milk cows. I'll go out and get another horse, but it will make you late gettin' started."

"Why can't I ride Trixie? I only want to go for a short ride, and I will bring back the milk cows as I come home."

"Trixie ain't more'n half broke, Miss Parker, an' I am afraid to let you ride her. That tenderfoot that was out here last summer ruined her. He came out here from the East and struck Ned for a job. Said he wanted to learn how to break horses, and he was game all right, but he didn't know how to ride.

"When he came over from Elizabeth lookin' for work, Ned asked him if he ever rode any, and he said 'No,' and Ned told him, 'Well, I've got a little mare

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that has never been rode, and I guess I'll just let you and her learn to ride together. It never fazed him a bit. He didn't know enough about a horse to be afraid of one.

"He brought a saddle and put it on her back, the way he had just seen Marcia saddle her horse, and Trixie just stood there, still as a mouse, lookin' at him out of the tail of her eye. We was all too much surprised to say anything even if we had wanted to. When he had the saddle cinched tight he put on the bridle and climbed on, and say, you'd ought to a seen that little beast buck. What-you-may-call-it-in-there, it look like she would jump over the barn. The tender-foot dropped the reins, in-there, and grabbed the horn with both hands, but even at that he didn't last more'n three jumps, when he sailed through the air like an eagle. But he had pluck, and after Trixie had bucked around with the saddle until she was tired, he got up and climbed on her again, and she stood still and let him, an' then she went through the same performance again.

"Every day he went out and tried her over again until at last Trixie seemed to get tired of the fun and quit buckin'. He used to take fine care of her. He even roached her mane. But even now she'll play tricks. You'll be ridin' along in a gallop and first thing you know, she'll jump way off to one side, an' there won't be a thing for her to skeer at, but she don't offer to buck any more."

"Well, I do so want to go for a ride. Perhaps she won't jump at anything to-day and if she does not buck I will git along all right."

"Well, I don't know," said Flint, doubtfully. "Steve told me not to let you ride anything that wasn't well broke, an' if I let you have her an' anything happened to you, he'd sure give me Hell, oh! excuse me ma'am.

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I mean he'd be damn mad. What-you-may-call-it-in-there, I don't believe I know what I do mean, ma'am, but it's nothin' disrespectful."

"That is all right Flint, I know what you mean," answered she, much amused at his confusion. "But I want to go for a ride, and Steve let his sister ride Trixie when she was over here."

"Well, that's all right. What-you-may-call-it-in-there, them girls can ride as good as any cowboy. Before women took to ridin' men's saddles, and side-saddles was scarce, they used to ride all over the country bareback, with only a circingle around the horse, like women do in the circus, but if you are determined to go I'll saddle her for you, but I hope you won't go far."

"All right, I won't go far. But hurry up, it is getting late."

Flint soon had Trixie saddled, and Miss Parker came out, called the dogs and started off. The rain had freshened the earth and the grass and flowers seemed to have taken on a new lease of life. As always, when in the saddle, all restlessness left her, and Trixie, in seeming understanding of her mood, walked slowly along, giving her ample time for quiet enjoyment of the scene. She was completely lost to all time or place, and paid no attention to the direction she took, or anything except the peace and beauty of the surrounding country.

She had ridden along in this way for some time, when suddenly from behind a bunch of sage brush, jumped a full-grown Jack rabbit, and bounded off across the prairie. Long ears erect, fluffy white tail bobbing, up and down, as it bounded along like a rubber ball; taking one long leap and then a short one, bringing his powerful hind legs well up under him, and shooting off again into space; turning his head



The trees looked inviting after the hot glare of the plains, so she decided to ride along
in their cool shadows.

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from side to side, and staring with round eyes to see if he was followed.

The dogs were hunting at a little distance, investigating every clump of sage, or soap weed or little depression, and did not see the rabbit until called; then they set off; the lighter ones in the lead at first, the heavier ones bringing up in the rear to come in on a long, steady run which called for endurance and power.

The rabbit, an old stager, and on to all the tricks of the chase, with prodigious leaps, led straight to a gulley, down one side and up the other, then circled around and came back the way he went. Leading the dogs up and down the hill again, hoping to wind them in the early part of the race.

But Old Nick who had seen that trick played before, slowed up, letting the other dogs follow the rabbit's trail up and down the hills, while he shot off to one side, and fresh and unwinded, intercepted the rabbit as he returned across the gulley.

Seeing this unexpected adversary, the rabbit became confused, turned and ran back towards the other dogs; then discovering them, whirled and launched straight ahead, the whole pack at his heels; too close for him even to dodge. Nick in the lead, jaws spread ready to pick him up, when suddenly the Jack ducked into a hole, and Nick's jaws closed on a mouthful of dirt.

Laughing at their disappointment and chagrin, but well pleased to see the rabbit escape, the girl called the dogs to her and taking a biscuit from the pocket of her coat, fed them as a token of her approval, and again started on her way.

Soon she came to a wide sandy creek, fringed on either side by a thick growth of trees. The shade looked inviting after the hot glare of the plains, so she decided to follow the course of the stream for awhile, and ride along in their cool shadows.

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Numberless birds called to each other from the tree-tops, while here and there in the gnarled and twisted branches of the willows were anchored great bunches of dry twigs, which puzzled Miss Parker for awhile, until coming to an unusually low branch, she saw some half-grown magpies peeping out. A little farther she came to what she judged was a tragedy wrought by the windstorm of the day before. An old dead willow had been blown down, and scattered all about were numberless dry twigs which had formed a nest, while here and there among the ruins were little birds which had been killed by the fall. The two parents circled aloft, voicing their grief with loud lamentations.

Filled with pity at their very evident distress, Miss Parker watched them for a moment, allowing Trixie to find her own way around the fallen tree, when suddenly she stepped upon a dry twig, which snapped with a loud report, and she, startled, reared and jumped sideways from under Miss Parker, leaving her with only one foot in the stirrup, and holding onto the reins.

Letting loose with one hand, she grabbed the horn, and struggled to get back in the saddle, but Trixie with a wicked look in her eye, continued to jump sideways up the hill, toward the low hanging branches of a tree.

Seeing that it was impossible to get back into the saddle, she loosened her foot, and stepped down, just in time to avoid being dragged off by the drooping limbs. Had she let go of the reins all would have been well, but Trixie made a lunge forward and Miss Parker fell backward, striking her head on a stone, and slightly twisting her ankle.

Millions of stars danced before her eyes, as she lay on the ground, stunned by the blow on her head, but kept from sinking into unconsciousness by the pain in

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her ankle. After awhile her brain cleared, and she attempted to get up, but sank back, weak and faint, and was aroused by old Nick sympathetically licking her hands, while Bettie and the pups sat around in puzzled bewilderment.

As the afternoon advanced, she made frequent efforts to sit up, but each time would be overcome with dizziness. As long as she lay quiet, her mind was comparatively clear, and she began wondering how she was to get home before nightfall. Already the chill which always creeps into the air as the sun goes down was stealing upon her, and making her long for the jacket which was tied behind her saddle.

And to make matters worse, the dogs showed signs of abandoning her in spite of all her coaxing and petting trying to keep them near. They would come up and nose her hand, and not finding the expected tempting morsel, would stalk away, much disappointed, and going to the top of a hill, would look off toward the ranch. Each time returning more reluctantly in answer to her call. Finally they disappeared one by one, and forgetful of all the choice tidbits they had received at her hands, hurried home to get their supper. When the last one went out of sight over the hill, the girl burst into tears.

After a time she ceased weeping and summoned what courage she could muster, to enable her to endure the long wait until some one should come from the ranch to find her. This would not be until far in the night anyway, and perhaps not until morning, as they would not miss her until sundown, and then they would not know in which direction to begin their search.

To keep herself from thinking of the night and its possible terrors, she began to listen to the birds, and tried to determine from their songs, how many varieties she could name.

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As evening approached, the little ones swallowed the last bug that the sharp eyes of their parents could spy through the gathering dusk. They were nodding in their nests in well-filled contentment or were tucked safely under their mother's wings. Then each male of his specie, his labors ended for the day, perched himself comfortably on some swaying bough, and added his voice to the evening concert.

There were notes of love, and others denoting anger, while others were twittering along in a conversational tone. It reminded Miss Parker of attending grand opera, and listening to the singers declaring love and vowing vengeance, all in different keys.

The same day, for so fate arranges things, Steve returned from delivering his cattle to Denver, surprising his family by making a much quicker trip than usual. He sat around and rested for awhile after dinner; then stepping to the door, he looked off across the prairie in seeming uncertainty, and then went to the barn and saddled his horse, and rode out in the pasture; ostensibly to look after the stock.

As usual, when he rode toward the east, he found himself looking off toward the Alton Ranch, and felt the impulse to ride in that direction. He resisted the temptation all afternoon, but as the shadows began to lengthen, he stopped to look up at the sun, surveyed the surrounding landscape, hesitated for a moment undecided, and as if drawn by some invisible force left the trail and set off across the untracked prairie. He galloped along with unabated speed, until he came to a high, bare ridge, mostly composed of smooth white pebbles, called the Indian Mound, so named because the Indians had used it for a lookout and signal station.

He paused here for awhile, his keen eyes searching every point of the country, but if asked he could not have told what he expected to find.

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As he sat there his wise old horse turned his head and eyed him for a moment, and then as if divining his master's indecision, started off slowly in the direction of the Alton Ranch. Then finding he was not checked, quickened his pace into a trot, then into a fast gallop, and kept it up steadily, up hill and down, only slowing up as he came to a dry, sandy creek.

As he was picking his way across this, both horse and rider were startled by a faint cry for help, which seemingly came from close at hand. At first Steve could discern nothing in the gloom. A second call attracted his attention to a dark object, half concealed by the trunk of a tree.

He dug in his spurs, and with two bounds was beside the huddled figure which toppled over as he rode up, causing the horse to snort and plunge. In her anxiety to see whether the horseman had heard her or not, Miss Parker had sat up, and again overcome by dizziness had reeled backward, just as Steve jumped off his horse and bent over her.

All the brilliant coloring had been drained from her face by pain and shock, and the sight of her pale face and closed eyes made Steve tremble and grow weak with the thought that she was dead. She had not fainted, though her senses were reeling, and she had to exert all her will-power to keep from becoming unconscious, and as Steve put his arm under her shoulders and lifted her up, she opened her eyes.

At the sight love and relief found expression in endearing terms, and in the same breath he inquired: "What has happened? Where are you hurt?"

It is my head. It goes round and round like a top, and I can't get up. I have lain here ages and ages, and the dogs all left me. And I was afraid the coyotes would eat me alive, and I've sprained my ankle," said

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she, all her woes coming out at once like a troubled child.

"You poor little thing. But how did it happen? Can you stand if I hold you?" Saying which he helped her up, but she staggered drunkenly and winced with pain, so he laid her down, and untying his coat from the back of the saddle, made her a pillow. As he was putting it under her head, he discovered there was a small scalp wound, much swollen, from which the blood had run and matted in her hair.

Telling her he would be back in a moment, he mounted his horse, and rode up and down the bed of the sandy creek for quite a distance in search of water with which to bathe her head, but not a drop could be found, so he was forced to bind it up the best he could with his scarf.

This done, he started to remove the boot from her injured foot, but at her cry of pain, desisted, and taking out his knife ripped it open, and the foot released from the pressure, puffed up to almost twice its former size.

Tearing the lining out of his coat, he tenderly bound it up, and then suggested going to the ranch for help.

"Oh! Do not leave me out here alone for the coyotes to chew on," exclaimed she.

"They wouldn't hurt you, but if you are afraid to stay I guess I could take you on my horse. Jim is gentle and can carry us both very easily, but I am afraid it'll hurt you awful bad."

"Let's wait awhile. Perhaps some one will come looking for me," suggested Miss Parker.

"No, we had better start right away. The sun has been down quite a little while, and it will soon be dark. Unless Trixie went right home they will not look for you until night and then they won't be able to tell which way you went."

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With that he led his horse up close and started to lift her up when, with a diffident look, she said:

"Wait! I believe I can stand." And she did for a moment as the pain in her ankle cleared her brain, but soon she clutched Steve by the arm, and with a gasp, said:

"All right. Get me home as quickly as possible. I do not believe I can endure this pain much longer."

He lifted her up in front of the saddle, and steadying her with one hand, swung himself up, the horse turned his head, and observed this unusual proceeding. Then he walked slowly along, stepping carefully, as though he knew any sudden motion or jar was not desired.

They went along for a little way, and Steve could see that the motion caused excruciating pain in her dangling foot, but with tightly clenched hands and teeth she bore it for a while without a sound. Then all at once her head sank limply back over Steve's arm, and she became unconscious.

"Gee! What must I do?" said Steve. "If I go on the pain may kill her, and if I don't we may have to stay out here all night, and she ought to have care at once."

But as there was nothing else to do, he dismounted and gently lifted her to the ground. Pillowing her head on his knees, he began chafing her ice-cold hands and wrists in an effort at restoration.

How he longed for some water to bathe her face and hands, or a drop of brandy to quicken her sluggish pulse. At last in despair he began bringing her arms up over her head and down at her side to produce artificial respiration, and was soon rewarded by a low moan, and a large tear slipped from beneath her closed eyelids and rolled down her cheek.

This was too much for Steve, and he lifted her up

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higher, turned his back to the wind, drew the coat closer about her, and kissed away the tears.

Night had come on and one by one the stars blinked out of the thickening dusk. The sky from horizon to horizon was void of clouds. The moon a silver crescent, hung poised in the west, and shed a soft, white light, revealing the man, the girl and the horse as the only living things in all that vast wilderness. Not a tree or shrub was in sight, while far out on the lonely prairie a single coyote sent up its plaintive wail.

A feeling of primitiveness and familiarity with the scene stole over Steve and he spoke aloud.

"We might be Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden."

Trixie did not go straight home after throwing Miss Parker, but overjoyed at once again finding herself free, galloped gaily across the country, kicking up her heels and neighing with delight.

Finally having worked off some of her exuberance, she settled down to grazing, and cropped greedily at the new grass which had sprung up after the rain. As she ate, her gradually filling stomach made the cinches become tighter and tighter, until along about sunset their pressure became decidedly uncomfortable, so she hunted up a nice sandy place and rolled.

Finding this did not serve she suddenly remembered how she had once bucked a saddle loose and threw it after her rider in contempt. Acting upon the thought at once, she humped her back and went after it, and bucked as only a tough little buckskin bronc can.

She seemed to throw herself into it with all the abandon of an accomplished toe dancer, balancing and whirling over the stage with an appreciative bald-

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headed row for an audience. At last when she was approaching the climax, and was madly turning pin wheels, and the saddle was hanging by one half-broken cinch, Ned and Marcia appeared in view.

"What the devil?" exclaimed Ned.

"It's Trixie, and I guess she's bucked Flint off," observed Marcia.

"No! she has thrown Miss Parker. See, there's her red jacket tied behind the saddle. I wonder where she is. I don't see her anywhere."

"Oh! I am sure she is killed, and it's getting dark and we can't find her."

"No," objected Ned, examining the ground. "Here are Trixie's tracks where she began to buck, and there is where she rolled. She must have thrown her before. You ride down that gulch and I'll go around this hill and meet you. If you find her fire your revolver, and if I find her I'll do the same."

With that agreement they set off, each vainly listening for the report of the other's gun. After that they rode on together, searching and calling, until finally Ned halted, and started firing his pistol at intervals, listening intently between times, but for what he did not know as he did not think Miss Parker had a revolver with her.

But almost instantly out of the stillness, came an answering report, and deciding that some one from the ranch was out searching also, they rode toward the sound, shooting now and then to keep the right direction. Presently they came in sight of a fire which Steve had built, having ridden back to the creek and carried up some wood.

After learning the extent of Miss Parker's injuries Ned rode back to the ranch for a wagon, and when this was ready hurried back after her, but before leav-

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ing, dispatched Flint for the nearest doctor, which was at Elizabeth, eight miles away.

Mrs. Alton returned with Ned bringing a supply of linament and bandages, and soon had Miss Parker's head and ankle bound up. Then lifting her into the wagon they carried her to the house.

Steve had to repeat so many times how he found Miss Parker and cared for her that he became tired of speech.

When the physician arrived he pronounced Miss Parker not seriously injured, but suffering from a slight concussion of the brain and a wrenched ankle, which though painful at the time, was not likely to give her much trouble if she kept quiet for awhile.

Hearing this everybody went to their different quarters for the night. All excepting Mrs. Alton, who was going to sleep on a couch in Miss Parker's room so as to be ready to get her anything she might need.

Steve lay with wide-open eyes until far toward morning, gazing at the stars through his open window, and living over again this most wonderful event of his life. He had held the girl he loved in his arms, and his pulses thrilled at the memory of the stolen kisses. Surely, he thought, she could not be indifferent to him now, since he had cared for her in her helplessness. The thought added new fuel to the flame which seemed already about to consume him.

And then he fell to wondering whether she would be able to go on the camping trip to the mountains that Ned and Marcia had been planning, and on which he had been counting so much to help him in his suit for her hand.

The next morning Miss Parker was well enough to put a decided veto on the suggestion of wiring her mother. In a few days the dizziness left her and the wound healed. The only difficulty was her ankle,

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which was badly swollen, and very sore, although the physician thought it was not broken nor dislocated.

He was positive in regard to the treatment, however, and ordered her not to attempt to use it for a couple of weeks, and with a sly look at Steve, suggested that there ought to be some one around all the time to see that his mandate was obeyed.

In a day or two Miss Parker said that she thought she could get up if she only had some crutches, so Steve made a hurried trip home after a pair of crutches which he had used one time when he had been hurt by a horse falling with him. After these were cut off a little she took the rest by surprise by hobbling out while they were eating dinner.

After that Steve hovered about like her shadow, and willingly forsook all out-door life for one of companion. It was lucky that there was nothing of importance to be done on his father's ranch at that time, as it would have been sadly neglected if there had been.

Along about the end of the second week the swelling commenced to go down, and they began to hope that they would be able to take the camping trip after all.

The doctor was called and examined Miss Parker's foot, and gave his reluctant consent, but growled out many words of warning and caution as he took his leave.

XII

CAMPING IN THE MOUNTAINS

The first day of September was the time set for starting on their much-talked-of camping trip, and when Steve arrived at the Alton Ranch about noon the day before, bringing his bed and what clothing he would need on the trip, he found Ned and Marcia quite enthusiastic over this trip, on which they were going to use their new camp wagon, which had only arrived that morning.

"That is quite a fancy outfit," remarked he, looking it over.

"Yes, it is," answered Marcia. "But every time we went camping there were so many things that we could not carry in the old chuck wagon we use on the round-up that we decided to have one made to order, and this is the result.

"Here is the chuck box at the back, and underneath it is another box, in which we carry our cooking utensils."

"Where are your bows for the wagon sheet?" inquired Steve.

"We are not going to have any, as they make the wagon harder to pull when the wind blows, and also obstruct the view. We have a tarpaulin to spread over it, and when it storms we will wear our slickers."

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About an hour after sun-up next morning they were ready to start. Miss Parker, who was to ride with Ned in the wagon, climbed up into the seat, before they hitched up the four mules, as the two leaders, Chakawana and Jaunita, were only partially broke; Mary Jane and Maud, the two wheelers, were old timers, and looked with tolerant eyes upon the antics of these skittish youngsters.

Steve kept ahold of their bridles until Ned took his seat and had a good grip on the lines, then he let go and sprang aside. Chakawana and Jaunita lunged forward, galloping and bucking, and swept Mary Jane and Maud along with them toward the creek.

Miss Parker clutched the seat with both hands, and held her breath. Ned set the brake as they approached the stream, and left it on as they went down and up its steep banks. This served to check their mad flight.

Marcia and Steve followed on horseback, driving before them the two extra saddle horses, which they were taking along for Ned and Miss Parker to ride when they wished.

Early risers in Kiowa waved them an envious good-bye as they clattered through, and Uncle Ben Mordant, who was on his way to Denver, climbed out of the stage coach and disappeared inside the nearest saloon, only to reappear in a few minutes with two bottles which he handed to Ned with a wink, saying:

"You folks might get a touch of mountain fever, and this medicine is a sure cure."

"Gee! I believe I feel a little feverish now," said Steve.

"Well, come along inside then," said Uncle Ben. "For if the fever is startin' so soon, you'll need all that is in them bottles to cure you. Where can I put them, Ned?"

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"Put them down in this oat bin, underneath the seat. Here, Miss Parker, hold the mules. I believe I need a dose of that medicine too." And thrusting the lines in her hands, he followed Uncle Ben and Steve inside the saloon, and Marcia laughed at the shocked look on Miss Parker's face.

They soon returned. Uncle Ben climbed into the stage. The driver cracked his whip, and swung out in the lead, and Ned followed close behind. When they had descended the next hill and Kiowa disappeared they considered themselves well started on their way. After a time the mules settled down to a steady pace, and jogged along in a leisurely fashion.

When noon came they made camp along the road near a gulch where there was a little spring trickling out of the bank, Ned was cook, and soon the appetizing odor of boiling coffee and ham broiling over the coals filled the air.

The coffee bubbled up in an incredibly short time, and Ned who was on the lookout for just such a contingency, picked up a hook and quickly lifted up the pot before the contents ran over and put out the fire. They had brought bread with them, and so dinner was soon ready. Getting a plate and cup, and helping herself, Miss Parker sat down in the shade of the wagon and ate her first meal in the open.

After a short rest they started onward, and along in the afternoon came to a large tract of land covered with stately pines, called the Big Trust Timber. Through the shadows cast by their spreading branches they wended their way along the narrow trail, which wound among the trees, and when evening came, made camp in a little sun-mottled glade, so as to avoid setting the forest on fire.

While Ned was getting supper, Steve and Marcia fed and watered the horses and mules, and then erected for

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Miss Parker's use the same little tent which Ned and Marcia used on the round-up. When this was done, Steve stripped some of the smaller boughs from the trees, and laid them on the ground, making a springy mattress, over which she spread her blankets. They were through just as Ned sent out a ringing call of: "Chuck is ready," which was echoed back from hilltop to hilltop.

Getting their cups and plates out of the drawer, they seated themselves on the dry, crisp grass just as the sun, a gleaming, copper ball, hung poised in the west, seemingly waiting a moment to greet her sister orb, the moon, which at the same time rose round and luminous in the east, above the dark shadows of the pines.

"What a strange phenomenon," remarked Miss Parker. "I never before saw the sun and moon hanging above the horizon like that. It looks like two suns."

"Maybe that coffee is too strong for you, and you are seein' things. I've often thought I saw two moons," laughed Ned, winking at Steve.

"Sure," agreed Steve. "So have I, but I don't see anything that looks like two suns now do you?" And then turning to Miss Parker, as he put away his cup and plate, he suggested: "Let's walk to the top of the hill and get a better view. Maybe it will clear your vision."

"Oh! all right," agreed she smiling. "When Trixie threw me and I bumped my head I thought I saw millions of stars before my eyes, and perhaps they have grown into moons by now."

As the moon mounted steadily higher, the sun sank behind the trees, sending back a faint, rosy reflection that deepened into a gowing crimson, streaked richly with purple. The two young people had by this time

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reached the top of the hill, and stood with their figures sharply outlined against the evening sky.

"While the girl silently enjoyed the spectacle, Steve stood looking at her with a tender, dreamy expression in his eyes, and there stole over him a feeling of ineffable peace and content. He came back to the present with a start at a remark from her, but his absorption had been so great that he had to ask her to repeat it, and then he answered promptly:

"Yes, I think it is the finest sunset I ever saw."

"Well, why don't you look at it then?" inquired she mischievously.

"I am looking at the only part that makes it unusual for me. I've seen that same combination of sun and sky lots of times, but always there was something lackin'. To-night, it is perfect. I understand what Adam meant when he said that it is not good for man to live alone."

"It was not Adam who said that," laughed she. "It was God."

"Well, I was wonderin' how Adam happened to cipher that out for himself, when he had always been alone," chuckled he, and then with a power of analysis and depth of expression that surprised her, he continued: "I suppose he was like I have been, and would sit and gaze at the sunset, and feel his heart swell and ache with an unaccountable loneliness, and puzzle over what was the matter, until God took pity on him."

Then coming down from his lofty heights, he added with his characteristic dry humor:

"I'll bet he didn't need an interpreter when he awoke from that deep sleep he was in, while God was performin' the delicate operation of removin' a rib and turnin' it into a woman. When he found Eve sittin' beside him he must have known at once what had been spoilin' the views, and makin' even the Garden of Eden

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as barren of joy as a desert waste. I can see where I'm goin' to enjoy this campin' trip as I never enjoyed anything before."

She was about to make some pertinent reply, to cover the confusion caused by his words and ardent glances, when Ned called to them through the gathering dusk.

"Hey, you two. It's time to go to bed. We ain't goin' to sit up all night chaperonin'!" You've looked that moon plumb out of countenance, and it's hidin' behind a cloud. I'll order it up about noon to-morrow so that you can get an early start."

The camp fire had burned down to a few glowing coals, and these Ned and Steve put out for fear that the wind might come and start a conflagration. When they were through, they all repaired to their different quarters for the night.

Ned and Marcia made their bed alongside the tent, but Steve being more luxuriously inclined, went up among the trees, and finding one with low hanging boughs, heaped up some pine needles and spread his blankets over them. He pulled off his coat and wrapped his boots in it, then put them under his head for a pillow, and slid between the blankets. With a few sinuous wriggles he made a place to fit his body, and was soon lost in a deep and dreamless sleep, which many a man tossing on his bed of eiderdown might envy.

Through the open flaps of her tent Miss Parker lay and studied the heavens and listened to the pines overhead sighing out their mournful wail of tragedy and sadness.

Thenext day they reached Colorado Springs, and driving over to Manitou, made camp at the foot of Pike's Peak, and from its protecting shelter, visited the many places of interest around that romantic spot.

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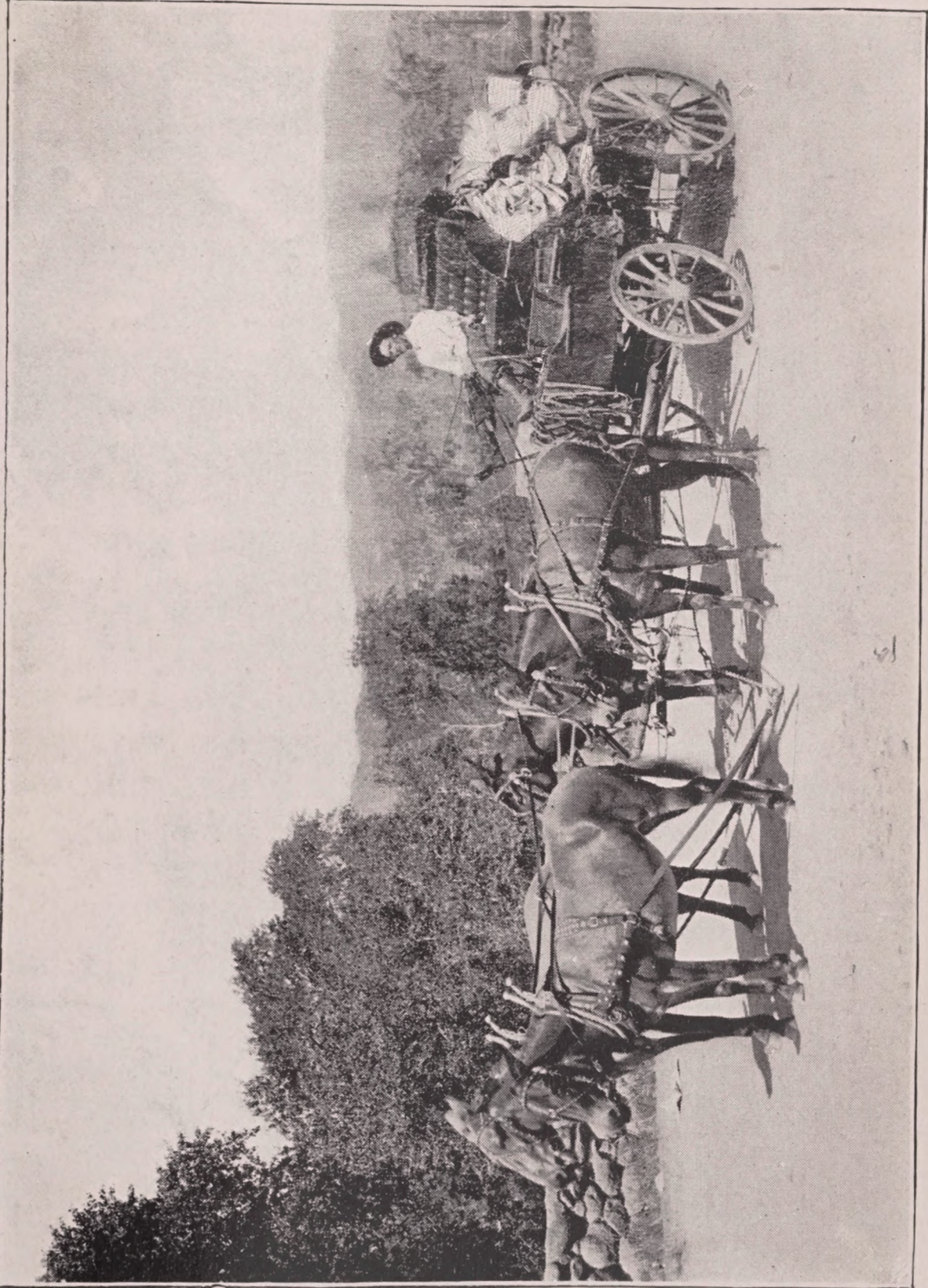
Then began the tortuous climb to the summit of the mountains, which was their destination. They struck boldly off up Ute Pass, following a narrow shelf-like road, hewed out of the granite cliffs, winding ever upward along the mountain side. While deep in the trough of the gorge, hundreds of feet below, was a racing riot of water, churned into soft, white foam, where it tumbled madly over the rocks.

The two lead mules shrank nervously away from the edge of the precipice, and crowding and shoving, kept as close to the side of the mountains as their harness would permit, making it difficult to drive them and leaving all the load for the rear mules to pull.

These were accustomed to traveling along dizzy heights, as they had been used by Ned and Marcia every year on their camping trips. However, Miss Parker had a fellow feeling for Chakawana and Jaunita, as she was equally terrified, and finally as they rounded a short curve, and the wagon swung out, she looked straight down to the bottom of the gorge with a thrill of terror. As she felt the insistent tug of the force of gravity, reaching out like the tentacles of some hideous monster, to drag her downward, she shut her eyes, and clutched a rope that was tied over the wagon to hold the many bundles in place.

She held onto this until noon came to her relief, when they ate their lunch on a little plateau. Then unmindful of all advice about using her foot too soon, she persuaded Steve to saddle her horse, hoping in this way to overcome the dizziness and terror, which attacks so many people in high places.

As the afternoon advanced, and either Steve or Marcia rode between her and the gorge, her nervousness gave place to a feeling of security, and for the first time since starting, the grandeur and beauty of the scenery made itself felt. She thrilled with the reali-



The mules, too, seemed to be impressed by the solitude, and were moving along half asleep, when suddenly they came to a down grade, and Ned attempted to set the brake, but it did not catch.

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zation that she was at last in the heart of the Rockies, and would soon climb to the top of those lofty peaks, and from their summit look off into space illimitable.

Like ants upon a highway they followed the trail, the peaks looming grand and forbidding above them, and she pondered upon the littleness of humanity and its petty striving. The others seemed to feel the spell, and as they rode along the hush of the mountains set its seal upon their spirits, and no one spoke for some time.

The mules, too, seemed to be impressed by the solitude, and were moving along half asleep, when suddenly they came to a down grade, and Ned attempted to set the brake, but it did not catch. The heavy wagon crowded upon them, and they, startled from their nap, instead of trying to hold back, broke into a wild run down the road.

Ned shouted to the riders in front, and upon looking back and discovering the trouble, they instantly set their horses into a run. This would have quickly put them out of danger, but Miss Parker's horse, which had been ridden but little since they started, became obstinate and commenced to buck. She clutched wildly for the horn, and not finding it, her hand waved impotently in the air for a few minutes.

Steve reined his horse alongside, and holding him there, settled himself in the saddle and reached out and caught her as she fell. He checked his horse for an instant, while she clambered on behind. Then telling her to slip into the saddle, jumped off and ran swiftly toward the granite cliff, and flattened himself against its side, the wagon and mules clattering toward him.

Fearing that the wagon would strike him as it lurched by, he crouched a moment, and tightening his elastic muscles, shot upward like a spring released, and

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caught ahold of a wild currant bush which grew out of the rocks above his head. He felt it give as the roots broke loose from their shallow moorings, and letting go with one hand, caught at a rock which jutted out a little beyond its fellows. The roots broke one by one, slowly his fingers slipped off the rock, and all holds giving way at once, he dropped with a thud, just as the wagon swayed under him.

Instantly upon alighting he crawled onto the seat with Ned, set the brake and held it. This served to check them somewhat, and coming to an up-grade they soon settled down to a walk.

Miss Parker, puzzled as to which of the two evils was the lesser, finally decided to continue riding, as Steve's horse seemed amendable to reason.

That evening they reached a lofty meadow, between jutting peaks. Close against one, with a sheer, straight wall for a bank, lay a tiny lake fed by a little mountain brook, which flowed fresh from the snows above.

This meadow and lake had been their objective point, and they at once set about making a permanent camp, as from here they could hunt and fish, and later make their way to the summit on horseback, carrying their camp outfit on the mules.

Putting a bell on Mary Jane, they turned the horses and mules loose to graze about. They were pretty well camp-broke by this time, and only occasionally wandered so far away that the tinkle of the bell could not be heard. They were left to shift for themselves, which was not a difficult matter, as the valley was covered with tender green grass, and soon their sides were bulging comfortably.

While Ned and Steve settled camp and erected the tent, Marcia and Miss Parker took out the rods and whipped the lake for trout, which rose to the fly so

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quickly that there was little sport in catching them, and presently they desisted. Hunting up a flat stone they helped Ned dress what they needed for supper, and then broiled them in the dutch oven.

XIII

THE EAGLE

Along about sunset, while they were eating supper, there appeared in the blue arc of sky above them an immense Golden Eagle, his bronze wings wide-spread and motionless, slowly circling overhead, as if inspecting this new feature of his well-known landscape.

They sat with faces uplifted, watching him, when suddenly he paused a moment, as if weighing the chances, and then with incredible swiftness, swooped down upon them. They dodged and threw up their hands, but he went straight on over their heads to the rock where they had left the rest of the fish. He picked up a large trout in his talons, then with powerful downward beats of his giant wings, flew almost straight upward until out of range, and with a long graceful curve, swept up toward the high snow-crested peak opposite, and came to rest on a tall, pointed rock which rose straight and high like a church spire above the cliff.

They stood looking after him in amazement for awhile, and then turned to finish their supper, which had been interrupted so summarily, only to find everything full of ashes from the camp fire, which the beating of his giant wings had puffed up.

As they saw him many times each day, winging his silent flight to or from the mountain, or seated on his lofty perch, they began to speculate upon the where-

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abouts of his nest, and one morning as with wide-spread wings, he launched himself off across the mountain tops, Ned, who was stretched out on the ground, looked up and said:

"I wonder what an eagle's nest looks like?"

"I don't know," answered Steve. "I'd sure like to see one. Supposin' we go and visit him. He'll think we ain't polite, if we don't return his call pretty soon."

"All right, I'll go you," agreed Ned, and getting up they set out on their difficult and dangerous enterprise, as heedlessly as two small boys daring each other to climb a tree and destroy the nest of a bluejay.

After going around the lake they came to a gradual slope, which was so easy of ascent, and they made such good headway, that they began to think they were going on a fool's errand, as no eagle would build its nest in a place that was apparently so accessible.

However, upon topping a sudden rise, they came to a sheer, straight wall of dark red sandstone, which at first appeared to be absolutely impassable. They dreaded the chafing they would receive should they return to camp without having found the nest, so they determined to see if they could not find a way up.

Upon looking closer they found that it was marked here and there by narrow ledges, the lowest of which seemed to be near enough for one of them to reach and swing himself onto by mounting to the shoulders of the other. This Ned, who was the lighter, quickly did, and once up, began looking about for means to hoist up his companion.

Had they been seasoned mountain climbers they would have taken the precaution before starting to coil their lariats about their waists, and then the matter would have been very simple.

However, above the ledge, the face of the cliff had been rent apart, and in this large crevice the dust of

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ages had been drifted by the wind, and held there by the water from a tiny spring which trickled out of the cliff above, and supplied abundant moisture for a few shrubs, and a wild grape vine, which clambered over the rocks above.

Quickly tearing it loose from the rocks, Ned let down the end, but kept a firm hold just above the roots, lest they pull out as Steve started to climb up it, and let him fall backward.

The ledge upon which they found themselves, while about five feet wide where they stood, gradually narrowed as it wound across the cliff, until there was just room for them to go sideways by clinging to the rocks with their hands. It ended abruptly in a slide, composed of small pebbles. Down this the hoary old peak was wont to send sliding and crashing its surplus snow to the valley, when the warm suns of spring had loosened it from its moorings on the mountain side.

Up this they climbed, or crawled with infinite care. Now and then they could steady themselves by clutching the boulders along the edge. At such times they would hold on tightly for a few moments, and lay flat on their stomachs for a much-needed breathing spell, while the merciless rays of the noonday sun beat down upon them.

They had climbed what seemed to them many miles, but was in reality a few hundred feet, when they came to another narrow ledge like the one from which they started. They decided to see if this was not on a level with the eagle's nest, and sure enough as they worked their way along, they saw ahead of them the tall rock, and a little below was the eagle's nest. A heterogeneous mass of dry twigs, with no soft down to make it cozy for their young.

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On the nest were two young eagles about half grown, which uttered shrill cries of alarm at sight of these strange beings invading their domain.

Evidently both parents must have been somewhere near, as they soon came swooping down upon the intruders, and before they could draw their revolvers, began tearing at them with beak and claws, and buffeting them with their rigid wings.

Steve drew his revolver and fired at the mother bird, who seemed bent upon pecking out his eyes. In doing so made a misstep, and went tumbling over the edge of the cliff, crashing and rolling, falling so swiftly that he had no time to grab at whatever shrubs there were. All at once, his progress was halted with a suddenness that almost jerked out what little breath he had left. His cartridge belt had caught on a rough, jagged stone, and had thus arrested his fall.

It took him some minutes to recover his wits sufficiently to discover what was holding him, and then he was afraid to move for fear of slipping the belt off the jagged rock, so there he hung suspended.

Just then Ned, who had shot the other eagle, looked over the edge, expecting to see a bruised and mangled heap of humanity at the bottom, and great was his amazement to see his friend clinging like a fly to the face of the cliff. He could not see what was holding him, and waited breathless for a moment, expecting to see his hold loosen, and him go sliding on down the mountain.

But as he still held on, after a few moments, Ned ventured to call down, and ask what was holding him. Then he looked around a little more, and saw that there was another narrow ledge two or three feet below, where Steve was clinging, and told this welcome news to him, for with his face to the cliff he could see nothing above or below.

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To this ledge he carefully lowered himself, and then began to try and find the extent of his injuries. Finding himself all intact, with the exception of a few bruises, and notifying Ned to that effect, they then began planning a way of getting him up or down.

The shelf on which he found himself, gradually narrowed into the cliff a few feet on either side of where he was sitting, and as they decided that it was impossible for him to climb either up or down with safety, Ned called to him that he would go and get their lariats.

Marcia and Miss Parker had decided not to accompany them on the trip, but promised to watch them through field glasses. This they did and were horrified and helpless witnesses of the frightful battle between the man and the eagles. The powerful field glasses seemingly brought the combatants within stone's throw of their eyes, and when Steve fell over the cliff, both women shrieked and dropped the glasses. They soon picked them up again, however, and focused them on a dark-looking object which appeared to be sticking to the side of the mountain.

When they discovered this to be Steve, and saw him lower himself to the ledge and Ned start away, Marcia divining their purpose, untied the ropes from their saddles and started to meet Ned.

She reached the rocky slide all out of breath, about the time Ned had worked himself along the ledge and climbed down. Again he assayed the hazardous climb, greatly hampered by the ropes, and finally arrived at the nest again.

Upon tying the ropes together, he found they were just long enough to reach Steve and leave enough to fasten around the base of the tree, so as to make a safe anchorage. Up this Steve climbed hand over hand, bracing his feet against the rocks, until at last

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he reached the top, and sat down for a much-needed rest.

After awhile they started the descent of the mountain, and reached the valley without further mishap, where Marcia and Miss Parker had a steaming repast ready for them.

They went over and over their adventure, and during a lull in the conversation Miss Parker inquired:

"What became of the eaglets?"

"By Gee!" exclaimed Ned. "We forgot to kill them, and they'll have to starve."

This worried Marcia and Miss Parker so much that Ned decided to go back the next day and get them, but waited until after noon when the sun was on the other side of the mountain. He returned about sundown, much scratched and clawed, but triumphant, with the two eaglets tied up in a bag.

They attached a cord to the leg of each, and picketed them to a tree, feeding them with scraps of game that fell to their rifles, and an occasional fish. The eaglets soon became used to their strange parents who came on legs instead of wide-spread wings and croaked eagerly for food every time they approached.

XIV

THEY GO BERRYING AND FIND A BEAR

They were now in the midst of Indian summer. There had been a little cold weather, with a flurry of snow and frost, and then there came stealing back, warm, balmy days, which were fast converting the forest into a riot of color. Rich golds, dark browns and brilliant scarlets, were all softened and harmonized by the green foliage of hemlock and pines.

The place where they had their camp was a hunter's paradise. Game of all kinds roamed through the woods, and they hunted, fished, bathed or did nothing as their fancy dictated. Only now and then did Steve and Ned go off on an expedition by themselves. Marcia could endure as well as they, any hardship that was to be encountered, and Miss Parker pluckily followed, although at first, it taxed their strength to the utmost. Gradually her muscles strengthened, and sun and wind converted her into a veritable wood nymph.

With her for his constant companion, the days flew by on golden wings, and Steve lived in an Elysian dream, from which he hoped not be awakened. As he became more deeply enamored, he ceased making the half-serious, half-jesting declarations of love, with

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which he had been wont to startle Miss Parker in the early part of their acquaintance.

Often as he reached up to help her over some wind-fall or boulder that obstructed their path, there would sweep over him like a wave, an impulse to gather her in his arms, and put his fate to the test.

With an avowel trembling on his lips, he would search her face for some sign of self-consciousness or confusion. She met each glance with an air of cool unconcern, and that sixth sense which had guided him safely through so many vital moments, bade him "Wait." With Spartan courage, he restrained the impulse, and turned away his expressive eyes, which glowed with love and self-revelation.

As usual, one morning while they were eating breakfast, the question came up as to what they should do that day, and first one thing and then another was suggested until Steve, with a chuckle, remarked:

"Well, the board of health has sent me the last notice, and I've got to wash."

"Wash! Didn't you wash before you set down to breakfast? Don't get reckless, man, you might take cold," exclaimed Ned.

"I mean, wash my clothes. You brought a wash-board along, didn't you?"

"Sure, and that's a right good idea. Guess we'll all wash."

"What will you do for a tub?" inquired Miss Parker.

"Tub!" answered Ned with much scorn. "Don't you suppose there was any washin' done before tubs was invented? Come on, Steve, let's make her a tub." Selecting some large rocks, they rolled them into the lake on the shallow beach, and stacked them up to about a foot below the surface of the water.

"There's your tub," said Ned. "Put on your bathin' suit and wade in." And this they did. Each doing his

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or her own washing to the accompaniment of much jesting and laughter. Soon various articles of wearing apparel were spread on the grass to dry.

When they had all finished, Ned looked at his watch and finding that it was only ten o'clock, proposed:

"I'll tell you what let's do. Let's go and pick some wild raspberries?"

"Raspberries," chorused the rest. "Where will you find raspberries this time of year?"

"I found some bushes the other day while I was lookin' for the horses. They are on a little knoll in the center of a swamp on the other side of the mountain, and sheltered so by bushes and shrubs that the berries were only just beginning to turn. They ought to be ripe by now."

Getting a bucket they eagerly started, and as the valley was on a level with their camp, they went around the base of the mountain, and in an hour or so arrived at the edge of the marsh. Miss Parker and Steve were in the lead, and when they came out on the edge of the marsh they could see nothing but a thick growth of shrubs and slender saplings through which they could not make their way.

"How are we going to reach the Island?" inquired she.

"There must be a path, somewhere," said Steve, looking about.

"Yes, here it is. Let's follow it and see where it leads."

Miss Parker walked ahead, her feet making no sound as she stepped lightly over the soft, feathery moss that carpeted the marsh and concealed the water, which filled each depression made in the moss as they lifted their feet. Presently they reached the island, and Miss Parker stepped out upon it, then with a low exclamation, shrank back in the bushes.



Steve took a step to one side for a better view, and saw a grizzly about half way up the tree, digging honey out of a hole with one clumsy forepaw.

Chap. XIV.

THEY GO BERRYING AND FIND A BEAR

Steve, who was a little behind, shouldered forward, and looked about, but could see nothing to cause alarm.

"What was it?" he whispered.

"Look up at that tree," said the girl. "What is it?"

Steve looked up and saw what appeared to be a big hairy arm and hand reaching around the tree. He took a step to one side for a better view and saw a young grizzly about half way up the tree, digging honey out of a hole with one clumsy forepaw, while he held on with the other three.

Bees swarmed all about him, and buried themselves in his thick fur, making such a noise that bruin had not heard their approach. Steve drew his revolver, took careful aim, and fired, hitting him just back of the ear.

Instantly the bear came sliding down, scratching and clawing. Tearing off great pieces of dried bark in his descent, and lumbered off, shaking his head. Soon he disappeared down another path a little to the right. He evidently attributed his discomfiture to the bees, as he never looked in their direction.

Then Steve remembered Ned and Marcia, who were a little behind, and shouted to them.

"Look out! There is a bear comin' down the path. Run around and head him off."

"All right," shouted Ned, and jumped behind a tree, just as the bear stuck his head out through the bushes. He had heard them shouting, and paused for a moment to reconnoiter before venturing forth. This gave Ned plenty of time to aim, and at his shot the bear shrank backward as if stunned, and the bushes closed over him.

There were a few convulsive movements of the shrubs, then all was quiet, and they were in doubt as to whether he was dead or just sulling, waiting for an

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attack. They sent several more shots into the place where they saw him disappear, and then cautiously approached and parting the bushes found him stretched out in the last death struggle.

Then Ned and Steve danced about, venting their joy in true cowboy abandon. That was the first bear that had fallen to their hands, although they had gone out many times in search of them.

Dragging it back across the marsh they drew out their long-bladed hunting knives, and started skinning it, while Marcia and Miss Parker returned to get the saddle horses to carry it back to camp.

When they had the bear skinned, and the hind quarters swung across a horse, Miss Parker looked up at the tree and observed:

"I wish we had some of that honey. It must be very good as the bear was so absorbed that he did not hear us.

"Well, we'll just get some," said Ned. "Where is the bucket we brought for the berries? We will have bear, biscuits and honey for supper." Taking off his muffler he tied it over his face and hat, and with a boost from Steve was soon up the tree. While he was getting the honey the others filled Steve's hat with berries.

When they reached camp about sundown, all were ravenously hungry, as they had had nothing to eat, excepting a light lunch which Marcia had brought back when she went after the horses.

Ned set the dutch oven over the fire to heat while he was making biscuits. Marcia broiled thick slices of steak, while Miss Parker made the coffee. Supper was ready by the time Steve returned from looking after the horses, and with appetites that would do it full justice, they all gathered around the camp fire and helped themselves.

XV

THE PROPOSAL ON THE SUMMIT

A few days later they decided to break camp and push farther up into the mountains, with a pack train, leaving the wagon behind. They shoved it back among the bushes, and packed it with things they did not wish to take along, feeling no compunction at leaving it, as they had found no signs of that part of the mountains ever having been traversed by human foot other than their own.

Ned started to pack the camp outfit, while Steve hunted up the horses. When they came he looked puzzled for a moment, and then jocosely inquired:

"Say! Which would you all rather do, starve or freeze?"

"I don't know," answered Miss Parker. "Have we a choice, and are we in eminent danger of doing either?"

"I don't know," said Ned dubiously. "Chackawana and Jaunita have never been used as pack animals before, and the way they acted on the trip up they might go over a cliff."

"I didn't think there was any danger of them going over. It looked to me like they were just as afraid of doing that as I was," laughed she.

"Well, that is just the point. They may refuse to cross some place and attempt to turn around and then go over."

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"If that is the case, put the cooking utensils and food on them, for if forced to do it, we could live on game and fish, but if there should come a storm we would freeze pretty quickly without any bedding or warm clothes." said Marcia.

And this they decided to do. Miss Parker brought out all the pots and pans, and soon there was quite a varied assortment spread around Ned, who started to pack them in a little box.

Noting Miss Parker's amazement at the size of the box he sent her off to help Marcia for a moment, and then dexterously fitted the kettles together, one inside the other, and put them in the box. The other utensils were wedged in around these, each having its own particular nitch, and every inch of space being utilized. Next came the dishes, which were of white enamel, unbreakable and very light. Soon all were disposed of, and when Miss Parker returned Ned could not make her believe but that he had hidden part of them.

However, with all his skill there was a little teapot which Marcia insisted upon taking along, that could not be fitted in the box, so Ned laid it on top, thinking he would tie it down. When the pack was strapped on Chackawana, she stood sullenly quiet until the rest were ready and started off.

At the first step the pot which Ned had forgotten to tie rattled, and she commenced to buck. The pack became loosened up, and other articles fell out one by one. As each one hit the ground it seemed to encourage the mule to greater effort. Soon cooking utensils were scattered in every direction, and looking them over ruefully, Ned called to Miss Parker:

"Say, do you still think I hid any of 'em?"

This meant an hour or two delay, while they changed the packs, as they decided to tie their three beds and

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extra clothing on Chackawana and Jaunita, as they were done up compactly and would not rattle. Staid old Mary Jane and Maud carried the tent and camp outfit.

Marcia and Miss Parker took the lead, while Steve and Ned rode behind to drive the mules along. Single file they wound around the mountain sides. At times following well-marked game trails, and when these dwindled away, or went in a different direction from which they wished to go, Ned or Steve rode ahead to pick the way.

As they were making the trip simply to see the country, they only hunted or fished when necessary to replenish their larder. This was not difficult, as the game having been so little hunted, if ever, was very tame.

Often as the pack train followed the tortuous trail, a buck or a doe, would stand temptingly out on some high point, within easy range, and watch them out of curious eyes. Tucked away behind boulders along the edge of the stream, and protected from the swift current, beautiful speckled trout rested lazily on the white sands of the bottom.

Day after day slipped by in swift procession as they made their way through gloomy forests, camped by placid lakes or followed the course of some stream. All about the sombreness was relieved by the splendor of the autumn colors. Here and there great splotches of woodbine, its leaves dyed a dark crimson by the frost, glowed in the slanting rays of the sun, giving the mountains the appearance of having been stabbed by some giant hand. They crossed small torrents which dashed swiftly down some steep incline for a pace, only to disappear under ground, and burst joyously forth farther down the mountain side.

Miss Parker awoke each morning with a thrill of

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romantic anticipation, and lay awake long hours each night listening to the sounds of the wilderness. The wind surged through the tree-tops, rising and falling like the waves of the ocean, often wafting to her the faint murmur of some distant cataract. Then it would die away, and for seconds not a leaf stirred, when suddenly the breathing silence would be broken. A pine cone dropped from overhead, a rock crashed down the side of a cliff, or some savage beast would send out a ringing call to its mate.

The mountains rose stern and commanding on all sides, and after a time it seemed to Miss Parker that they were rebuking their lack of purpose, and turning to her companions, she inquired:

"Where are we going? We should have some goal in this vast wilderness. That tall peak opposite seems to beckon me. Why not have it for our objective point?"

The others assented, and it seemed to her as they slowly climbed upward, that before her spread the parable of life.

First came the meadows, with their sparkling lakes and bright green grass, representing youth, with its careless flaunting of colors; then came the staid and stately pines of middle life, which diminished and grew smaller and smaller until they disappeared entirely at that magic place which marks the timber line. Heaven now being close at hand the peaks, ever looking upward, are dressed in sober tones, with at last only a snowy shroud between them and the shining skies.

To the left, from out of the side of the opposite mountain, rose sheer, straight, some tall spires of dark red sandstone, upon which the bright rays of the sun played, illuminating some points and throwing others in shadow, causing it to glow like a mighty ruby.

"See!" exclaimed she to Steve, who was just be-

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hind her. "That mass of rock looks like some old Feudal castle. I should not be at all surprised if some half-savage horde should swoop down upon us and take us captive."

Just then her horse shrank back, and with a terrified snort stood still. Miss Parker looked ahead, and then hastily dismounted.

"What's the matter?" inquired Steve, who could not see the path in front on account of her horse.

"There is a deep gorge just ahead, with no way across, except over a narrow ledge of rock, and my horse refuses to go over it. What are we going to do?"

"I'll get off and see," said Steve. Calling to Ned to halt the pack train, he crept around Miss Parker's horse to the edge of the precipice, and peered down into the dark cavern. Far below, but lost in shadow, a violently rushing stream, imprisoned in the rocky channel, sent a faint gurgle to their ears.

Just then Ned came up, and Steve inquired:

"Do you suppose we can get the horses across on that little bridge?"

"Well, we'll have to try, as we can't turn around on this trail, and the mountain is too steep to take them up or down. It is goin' to be a ticklish job, for if they get on there and start to backin' or cuttin' up they'll go over sure. Get Miss Parker over first, and then we'll try and lead her horse across."

At this remark Miss Parker's heart sank, and she turned pale, but with a look of resolution took hold of Steve's outstretched hand and made a few steps forward.

"Look straight ahead. Don't look down," commanded Ned, but the advice came too late. Holding tightly to Steve's hand she stood swaying drunkenly like a reed blown about by the wind. Ned hurriedly stepped up behind and steadied her while they helped

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her back to the bank. Her nerve all gone she sank limply on the the path and sobbed out:

"I know you think I am an awful fool, but I can't go over. I never could keep my balance in high places. I always want to cast myself over."

"Well, rest awhile and I'll carry you," said Steve, reassuringly. "And if you'll look up instead of down we'll get over all right."

After a few minutes he picked her up and started across, and when Miss Parker felt him step on the ledge, with a convulsive movement, she clutched him tightly around the neck and shut her eyes.

Now, a healthy young woman is no light load, but looking straight ahead, and stepping carefully, Steve walked across the ledge, his calmness and steadiness belied by his throbbing heart, and the blood which mounted slowly to his face and neck, at the touch of her clinging arms. Reluctant to put her down, he stood holding her for a moment, until she opened her eyes to see why he had stopped, and realizing that they were again on *terra firma*, released her arms from around his neck and sat down.

He looked down at her, but she would not meet his glance, and a deep flush slowly mantled cheek and brow. At this sign of confusion his daring returned, and with a low chuckle he bent over swiftly and planted a kiss on her red lips, and whispered:

"That is to pay for your passage over." Then turning quickly he went back on the other side to help Ned get the horses across.

Miss Parker's horse absolutely refused to make a step until they blindfolded it, and then Steve went ahead and led it. When it reached the ledge it walked steadily, but trembled at the hollow sound made when his feet struck the rock bridge.

Mary Jane and Maud followed one behind the other,

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stepping gingerly and rolling their eyes, but when Chackawana saw what was before her, she attempted to turn around. Ned and Marcia shouted to her, and tried to head her the other way, but with a quick jump she whirled, missed her footing and went tumbling headlong down the mountain side. Over and over she rolled, bounding from one rock to another, until finally she landed plump against a tree and lodged.

Ned looked at her for a moment, started to say something, choked it back, and turning around, said:

"Say, Marcia! You and Miss Parker go around on the other side of the mountain, so I can tell this mule what I think of her."

After that they took no more chances, and blindfolded the two horses and Jaunita before attempting to get them over. Then began the difficult task of getting Chackawana back to the trail. They first untied her pack, and then fastening their lariats around her neck and wrapping the other end around a tree a little higher up, took up the slack in the rope as she scrambled up the almost perpendicular sides until she was safe on the path again. Then they blindfolded and led her across, and then carried over the beds and strapped them on her back again.

After that they traveled on without mishap, but after passing the timber line the way became so rough that they decided to stop where they were, and not attempt to make camp on the top as they had first intended. As soon as they had the tent erected and had gathered wood and made a fire, Steve suggested that they climb to the top in order to get a view from the summit.

"All right," agreed Ned. "Come on, Marcia." But at a knowing flash from her, he stopped, looked at Miss Parker quizzically, scratched his head, and then turned back to camp, saying:

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"You two go on. Marcia is too tired. We'll go up in the morning and see the sunrise."

The way was rough, and as they toiled upward the air grew lighter, and surprisingly pure. Their chests rose and fell with their labored breath, and a feeling of lightness and aloofness came over them. When they paused for a moment to rest and get their breath, she remarked:

"I have the queerest sensation. I have a mysterious feeling of leaving all things behind, and that it is our will alone that holds us to earth. I believe if we let ourselves go, we would float off into space like a cloud. Do you feel that way?"

"I feel a little dizzy. It is the high altitude." And reaching out he took her hand, which was resting on the rock between them, saying:

"I guess I'll keep ahold of you after this. That suggestion of yours about disappearing frightens me."

"I don't think there is any danger," laughed she, but not removing her hand. "If I had a long trailing robe I might try it. But an angel in a short skirt and high boots would look rather grotesque."

As he held her hand, Steve's heart began to pound, and the voice that had hitherto urged him to wait, whispered "Now! Now! Now!" He lent toward her, but she divining what was coming, arose hastily, saying:

"Come on, we must reach the top. I shall never be content until I have seen what is beyond. There seems to be a voice calling, which retreats as I advance, and will only deliver its message from the topmost peak."

After a stiff climb they reached the summit, and hand in hand stood perfectly still, spellbound at the marvelous view spread out so startlingly before them.

Straight down from the narrow plateau on which

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they stood dropped the steep sides of the mountain to a cup-like basin of varying shades of green. A little lake gleamed like a mirror in the center of the emerald-green bottom, and reflected the snow-capped peaks which surrounded it, looking like the scalloped edges of a cup. On all sides rose numberless peaks, white and uneven, like the jagged teeth of a shark.

The girl drew a deep breath that was almost a sob, and unconsciously stepped perilously near the edge to get a better view. Steve noted it, and slipped his arm around her to steady her.

A light wind came up and grew more chill as it gradually increased in intensity, but so absorbed were they both; the girl with the scene and he with her, that they did not know it.

As she looked it seemed to her that the voice that had urged her onward was stilled. She had a sense of waiting and expectancy, as if she was on the verge of some great experience, and one unguarded word or look would plunge her into it.

"Am I becoming a fatalist?" thought she. "Or have I always been one? Was that restless longing which has always possessed me but the call of fate, luring me on to fulfill my destiny?" She felt the stirring of some unknown forces within her; a new voice which pulsed in her heart and sought an answer.

Then suddenly she became conscious of Steve's arm holding her in a tender clasp, and her heart whispered with each quickened beat: "The answer is near. The answer is near."

Slowly her head turned as if drawn by some invisible force. Her eyes raised and met Steve's glowing in the bright light with an ecstasy of love. Her heart leapt in answer, and her brown eyes flashed back its message. He stepped back away from the edge, and reached out his arms, and she swayed toward them,

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but paused midway and looked past him, her eyes widening with terror.

"Look behind you," she breathed. He turned quickly and saw bearing down upon them a heavy, black cloud. Looking about for a place of refuge he saw a large boulder to their left, and quick as thought caught her in his arms and half carried her to its shelter, just in time to avoid being blown over the cliff.

The wind howled, and the cloud settled round them, depositing fine particles of snow as it came, until they were thickly covered. They shook it off, only to be covered again. It did not seem to fall, but had more the appearance of growing.

They crouched behind the boulder shivering. Steve clasped her tighter in his arms, their lips met, and the storm was forgotten.

Presently the clouds drifted lower, shutting out the world below; the sun warmed them, and they awoke as from a trance and looked about and at each other with a startled, puzzled expression of one who has seen a vision, but still doubts.

The mountain on which they had been seated when the storm commenced had disappeared, and in its stead was a glistening island, surrounded by a billowy sea of gray clouds. Slowly other islands appeared, around which the clouds surged and rolled, sometimes entirely submerging them.

Then gradually the mountains emerged, seeming to grow upward to meet the sun. All their ruggedness and barrenness had vanished, concealed by a carpet of snow, which caught the rays of the evening sun, and reflected lights and colors in startling variety, like some mighty prism.

Cold blues, steel grays, bright orange and crimson, but all were devoid of warmth. The opposite peak

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rose higher and higher toward the sun, and at last they seemed to leap toward each other like two lovers long separated, saluted with a lingering kiss, and the sun disappeared behind the peak, throwing it in striking relief against the sky. Dark shadows appeared, and turning they could see the camp fire glowing against the snow.

At last the girl found her voice, and murmured:

"We have been above the clouds, and I always thought that was where Heaven was."

"Well, it is," said Steve, with conviction. "At least I have captured an angel and found Heaven in her caresses, and bending over he caught her in a long embrace, and so they sealed their betrothal."

Coming from behind the boulder they climbed down from the top and passed at once into twilight, which deepened into night as they made their way toward the camp.

Steve with all the tender care of a man in the first flush of love helped her over each obstruction, almost carrying her in places where the snow made the footing insecure.

As they neared camp Miss Parker cautioned:

"Don't say anything to Ned and Marcia. We must not tell any one until my mother knows."

But one glance at their radiant faces told the story, and Ned and Marcia expressed their satisfaction in pantomime behind their backs.

The next morning all four toiled up the mountains to see the sunrise, and when they reached the summit stood looking off over a sea of dark-gray mist. Far beyond could be seen the first rays of the sun, painting the sky a rosy hue as it slowly peeped over the mountains, and out of the mist rose here and there the tops of the peaks, chill and desolate, like islands out of a winter sea.

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The sun mounted higher, the mist dissolved, and through the crisp air the mountains rose bare and rugged. The light snow had been swept into the hollows by the chill north wind, which had whistled and moaned through their tops all night. Ned looked a moment and then remarked:

"Say, but wouldn't that valley be a great place for a bunch of rustlers to make a camp. It is entirely surrounded by mountains and has plenty of water and feed, and no place to enter but that low pass at the south." Then seeing that Steve and Miss Parker were so absorbed that they did not heed him, he turned to Marcia and observed "I'm afraid winter is upon us. We had better break camp and hit the trail for home. That snow yesterday was but the forerunner of more to come." And motioning for her to follow, they returned to camp.

Steve saw them go, and reaching out, took Miss Parker's hand and drew her nearer, and side by side they stood entranced. Deep purple shadows hid the valleys, and these shaded to a pale violet as they neared the top until they were blended and lost in the primrose glow of the sun reflected on the snowy crests.

"How wonderful," exclaimed Miss Parker, breaking the silence. "It makes my heart ache to think of leaving. Must we really go down soon?"

"Yes, I am afraid we must. We might get caught in a storm and not be able to get out." Then looking at her with a half shy, half tender glance, he suggested: "But we could come back on our honeymoon."

"How splendid. Surely such roseate surrounding should cast a glow over all our after-life, and we could never sink to the sordid bickering in which I have heard so many people indulge. I am so glad you thought of it, for now I can leave without regret."



The mist dissolved, and through the crisp air, the mountains rose bare and rugged. The light snow having been swept into the hollows by the chill North Wind.

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"Well, that is settled," said Steve, with a happy look. "We'll come up here and camp all next summer." With that he could contain himself no longer, and boyishly vented his joy by dancing a jig on the mountain top.

Then he stood still and opened his arms, waiting with a pleading look in his eyes. It seemed to be his whim to make her come to him. Slowly she approached, he strained her to him in a quick embrace, and was about to press a kiss upon her lips when she whispered:

"Wait! We must bid good-bye to the mountains first."

With his arms still about her they looked off at the innumerable peaks, which stretched back on all sides from where they stood one behind the other until they were lost beyond the horizon.

Her eyes widened, and she looked long, drinking in the view as a thirsty traveler, setting out upon a trip across the desert, would drink of the last spring of fresh water. After a time she whispered:

"Farewell, until our honeymoon."

Steve's heart gave a bound, he pressed his lips to hers, murmuring: "Until our honeymoon."

When they reached camp they found Ned and Marcia bustling about, and had almost everything ready. Soon they tied the packs on the mules and started down, pausing at every bend in the trail to look back at the peak, which reminded them of the glory that had come to them on its summit.

As they descended the snow disappeared, and so they paused a day or so to give the horses and mules a rest, and then started homeward.

Now and then Miss Parker would have a feeling of uneasiness when she thought of her mother, and what she was apt to think of her engagement, but she reso-

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lutely shut her mind to anything beyond the present, determined to live to the full this romance which had so fortunate a setting.

As they journeyed downward she and Steve rode ahead, now lost in silence or engrossed with each other, and Marcia who was unwilling to be an unwelcome third, took to riding with Ned in the wagon, but they were oblivious to the change.

However, they came out of the clouds very suddenly when they arrived at the Alton Ranch, for there they found a telegram awaiting them, telling her that her mother was very ill and to come home immediately.

Packing up left her little time to think and the next morning accompanied by Ned, Marcia and Steve she went to Denver and that night took a train for the East. Out in the vestibule of the Pullman she said adieu to Steve while Ned and Marcia discreetly looked the other way. With her heart torn between love and anxiety, she started homeward.

The voice that had beckoned her eagerly onward was stilled and, searching her heart, she wondered, "Was it the West that called me or love?"

XVI

SCHOOL OPENS AND MISS LITTLE RETURNS

It was Saturday morning when Steve arrived at the Bar Gee Ranch, after returning from Denver, and he found that Blackie was away on the beef round-up which had started a week before. He went out at once in search of horses from which to select his string of saddle horses, and was up early next morning, making preparation to start.

He had his horse saddled when one of the Colwell children rode up and delivered a message from his mother.

"I came over to tell you that Miss Little is coming out to-day, and wants somebody to meet her. Papa is on the round-up and mamma wants to know if you won't go after her."

"Well, I was just goin' to start on the round-up myself. Can't you get somebody else to go?"

At this request the boy looked rather surprised, and he gave his uncle a searching glance.

"Well, I don't know who it would be, besides, what's the matter with you? Last year you used to be hunting chances to take her places, and now you are tryin' to miss one." And then with an impudent wink, he asked: "Say, how far is it to New York?"

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"I don't know," answered Steve. "You'll have to ask your teacher."

"Well, get her out here then and I'll ask her."

"All right, then," agreed Steve with a chuckle. "I'll go after her. But I won't promise I'll bring her. She may refuse to ride home with me."

"Ah! go'wan. She used to like to travel with you well enough last year. And besides you are safe. She'll either have to ride with you or walk."

While he was tying his horse at Watkins, several cow-punchers came galloping up, among whom were Blackie and Fred Knox. They dismounted in front of the saloon, threw the reins over their horses' heads and letting them trail, descended in a body into Mike's saloon for refreshments. Fred Knox, seeing Steve, stopped to speak to him, but Blackie, whom he had not seen since his return, went on into the door, pretending not to notice him, and stopped at the bar close by so that any conversation between Fred and Steve was readily heard by him.

"Hello, old-timer. Where did you come from? Thought you was off on a campin' trip with Ned and Marcia and a certain lady from New York," said Fred.

"Well, I was, but we got back Wednesday, and I was goin' out on the round-up, but had to come up to meet Miss Little, who is comin' back to-day. Where are you all workin'?" And Fred noting Blackie's tense listening attitude through the open door, answered: "We are cutting out over at Mohoney's corrals." And then for Blackie's benefit, added: "I thought that deal was off since Miss Parker arrived."

"Well, she went home Thursday," said Steve, with a grin.

"Humph! Nothin' like havin' them comin' and a-goin' at the same time. You sure are the sport."

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"Well, it looks like it. But you can take it from me. There's only one, and she's goin'."

"You think so now, I guess," drawled Fred. "But you are liable to change your mind by spring. You know 'absence makes the heart grow fonder—of somebody else.' And New York's a long way off. Come on in and have a drink."

"All right, but we'll have to hurry, as I see the train comin'."

He hurried to the depot as the train pulled in, followed by Blackie and Fred. Miss Little looking out of the window of the coach was surprised to see them all three on the platform, and was puzzled to determine which one had come to meet her, but seeing that all the rest but Steve wore chaps, she decided that he must be the one. Now all summer she had been working over some plan whereby she could bridge the gulf between them without any loss of dignity herself. In all her planning she had not counted upon him being at the station to meet her, but like a good general who comes suddenly upon the enemy, she immediately readjusted her campaign.

She had kept posted upon how matters were progressing between him and Miss Parker. She judged that the latter's departure for New York would end that affair, and during the long winter months, she would have the field all to herself. She loved intrigue, and planned by adroit manoeuvring to bring him to her feet again, but now she was a little at loss as to what manner she should adopt toward him. Slowly she picked up her bundles and went out, trying to determine whether she should act as though she had a grievance or ignore it and treat him with friendly indifference. She finally decided on the latter course.

Now, Watkins is a mere speck on the landscape, being composed of one store, one hotel, one saloon and

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the depot and section house. It is not possible to miss seeing any one who happens to be in town, but when Miss Little stepped off the train, she stood looking off toward the hotel for a moment so as to allow Steve time to approach and make the first advance. Then with well-feigned look of surprise she acknowledged his presence with a light:

"Oh, here you are," giving Fred and Blackie the impression that she knew who was to meet her.

Steve took her grip and walked with her to the hotel. While he was getting his team, Blackie approached her and after talking a moment, asked her to go with him to the next dance, and she assented just as Steve drove up. As they went along she chatted in a gay impersonal manner, inquiring about every one, with friendly interest, even asking with unconcern about his camping trip, until Steve said to himself:

"I guess I overshot the mark when I thought she cared about my not taking her to the dance the Fourth." And he left her at the Colwell Ranch with the exhilaration a man always feels when he had been pleasantly entertained by a pretty woman.

Miss Little congratulated herself upon her success, and felt no misgivings because Steve had said nothing about a future meeting. She knew she would be sure to see him at a dance in the near future, as Blackie would take her to any that came along. She went to sleep that night chuckling to herself, and saying:

"The same old game is on."

XVII

THE BEEF ROUND-UP

One day about a week after Steve joined the round-up, Pere Gardeau drove up, and with him was Mr. Robinson, the stranger whom the cowboys had met in Denver while delivering horses in the spring.

They arrived about noon, and to the Easterner the scene was fraught with intense interest. In order to be protected against the wind which was sweeping across the prairie with tremendous force, they had made their camp for the day in the bend of the creek, which with its fringe of cottonwoods in their autumn foliage, made an immense golden horseshoe.

Well back near the center stood the mess wagon, with its open chuck box at the end, and nearby over a smoking camp fire dinner was in process of cooking. Soon the horsemen began to arrive, suddenly appearing on top of the opposite hill or through the trees. Each one brought in a bunch of cattle which they drove over to the general herd, and left them in charge of two or three cowboys.

Then the hungry men, each took a tin plate from the mess wagon and helped himself to a generous supply of beef, potatoes and beans, and selecting one of the many rolls of bedding which were scattered about, seated himself upon it.

When they were through eating, and the horse-

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wrangler had driven in the herd of saddle horses, each man roped and saddled a fresh mount for the afternoon. As they were getting ready to go to work, Steve noting the wistful look in Robinson's eyes, asked him if he would like to ride out with them, and he gladly assented.

This was too good an opportunity to lose. Billie Johnson, his round and jovial face aglow with mischief, overheard Steve's inquiry, and he and Fred Knox roped a horse and quickly putting a saddle on it, led it up to Robinson and blandly offered it to him for the afternoon.

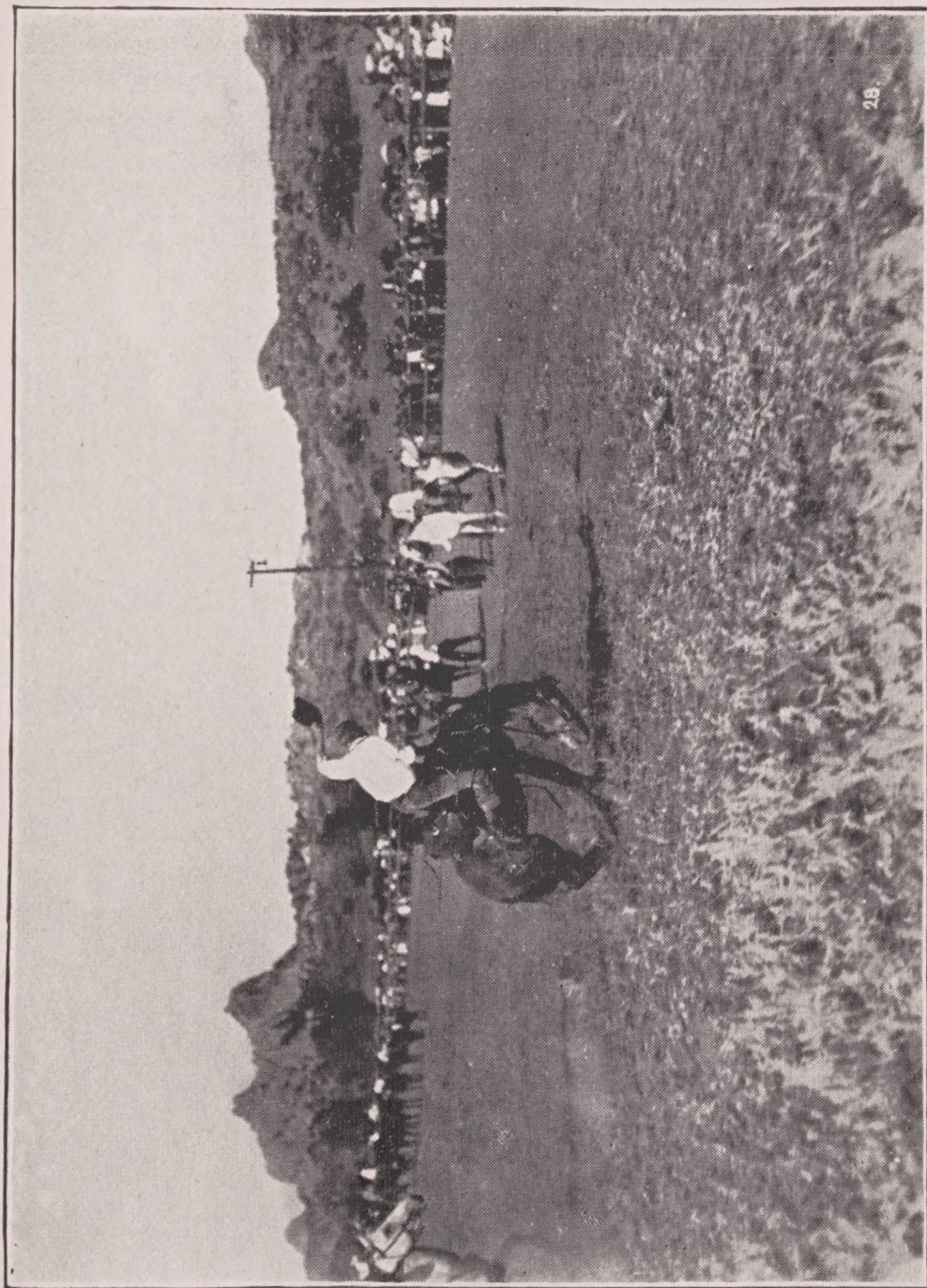
Steve suspected what they were up to, but said nothing, for while Robinson was free from many of the offensive mannerisms and the air of superiority which most Easterners tactlessly adopt toward the cowboys, and his disregard of his clothing matched their own, still he would have to take his share of the baiting and chaffing which falls to the lot of the tenderfoot.

Robinson gave one look at the saddle which was the ordinary cowboy style, weighing from thirty to forty pounds, and covering the horse almost to his hips, and exclaimed:

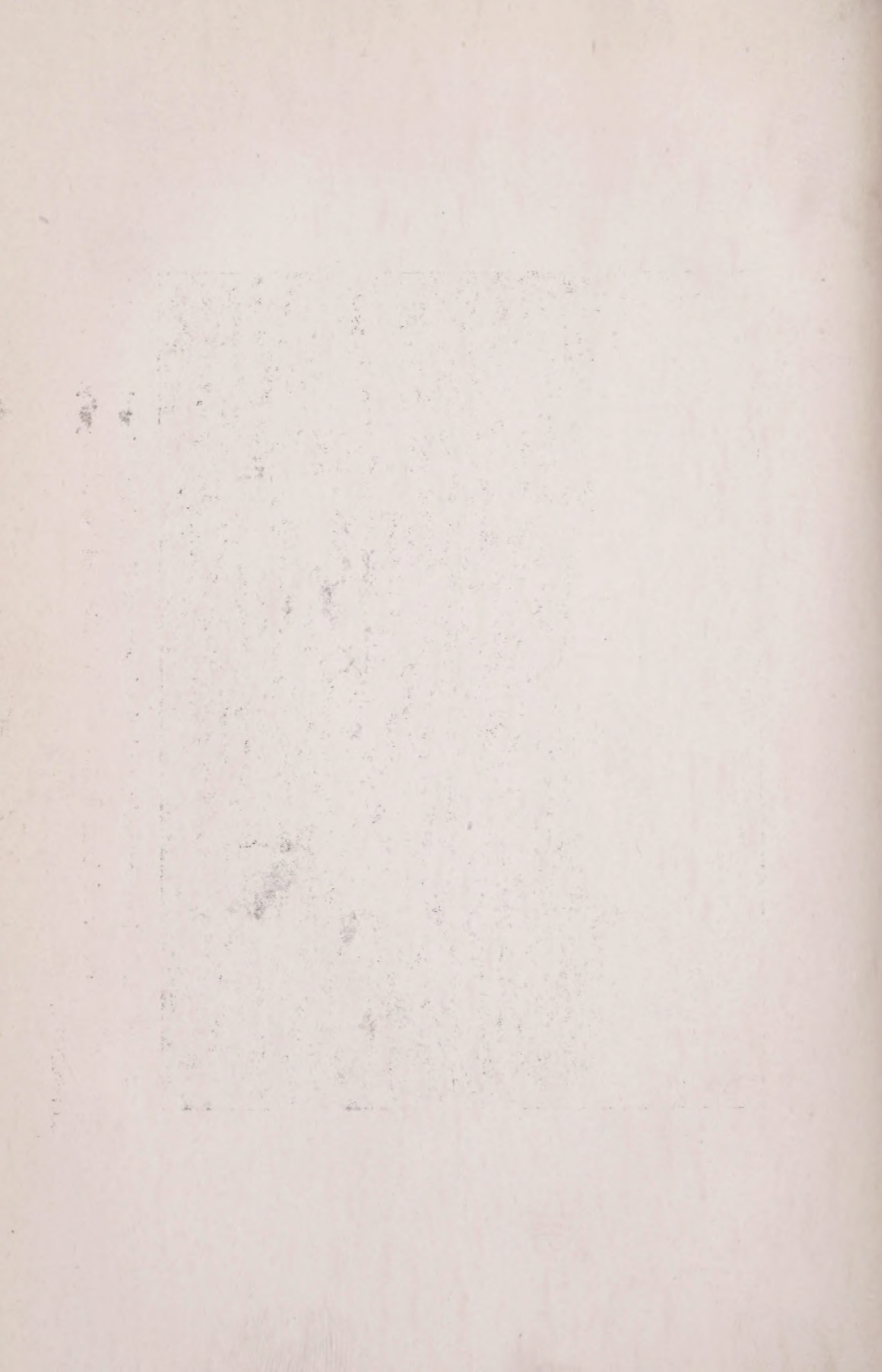
"What! Me ride that thing!" And going to the buggy in which he had come, he pulled from underneath the seat a small flat saddle, which he had brought along from the East. Then cautiously approaching the horse, he started to remove the saddle and replace it with his own.

Pere Gardeau approached and said: "Unless you are a pretty good rider you had better leave that saddle on. You may need all the leather there is on it before you are through." Robinson took the hint and desisted.

The rest waited expectantly, and the horse as if divining that he was the center of interest, bowed his back, and bucked loyally. But much to everybody's



The rest waited expectantly, and the horse as if divining that he was the center of interest, bowed his back, and bucked loyally.



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surprise, Robinson did not fall off, but stuck faithfully to his saddle, through all the twisting and turning. When at last the broncho gave up and settled down, Pere Gardeau who had stayed to see the fun, asked:

"Well, Robinson, how do you like that horse?"

"Oh, he's all right," answered Robinson, seriously. "But don't he lope awful dahmed high?"

At that the cowboys whooped and howled, and Ned, seeing Robinson's puzzled expression, said:

"Don't mind them. You've won your spurs and from now on you are one of us."

As they started off Pere Gardeau called after them:

"Here, Steve, is a letter for you. I almost forgot it."

"Is it from New York?" asked Marcia, coming up. "Did Miss Parker get home all right, and how is her mother? We have not received any mail since we came on the round-up."

But Steve was deeply engrossed in this first letter from his lady, and did not answer. At that Ira galloped up, and made a grab for the letter, saying:

"Here, wake up. Marcia asked you a question."

"Oh! He can't hear you," observed Ned. "He thinks he is up in them clouds again." Then one after another dashed up trying to get the letter. Steve's horse seemingly enjoying this game of tag darted about like a flash, turning this way and that and doubling back, miraculously avoiding the treacherous prairie dog holes, and kicking up a cloud of dust, through which came their shouting and laughter.

They kept it up until all at once Steve found the way clear ahead of him, and dashed off at full speed for the herd of cattle. When the rest came up, Robinson remarked:

"That gray horse seems to be unusually handy and quick."

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"Yes, he is," agreed Steve. "And he is intelligent, too. He will go in a bunch of cattle and cut out one and run it off without my ever touching the reins."

"Well, you'll have to show me," said Ned, who overheard the remark. "I'll just bet you even money that he can't do it."

"All right, I'll take you. Robinson will hold stakes, and see fair play."

The other cowboys formed in a circle around the bunch of restless cattle, and Steve tying his reins together, let them hang loosely over his horse's neck, and with only a slight pressure of his knees on either side guided him toward the herd. Then he rode among the cattle until he found one bearing the "—G" brand, and the horse in some occult way divining which one was wanted, singled it out from the rest, and gradually worked it toward the edge. When it was once outside the horse knew well enough what to do with it, but he had made an unfortunate selection. He had cut out a long-legged, rangy heiffer, that bounded off like an antelope and went in every direction but the one wanted, dodging and doubling back like a jack rabbit whenever the horse came too near. Finally he had it headed the right way, and ran it off to a bunch of beef cattle which the day herder held a short distance away.

Turning he trotted back toward the others and going up in front of Robinson, stopped still and struck the ground a few impatient taps with his front feet.

"You win," agreed Ned. "I can understand his knowin' what to do with the cow and where to take it to, but how did he know which one to take?"

"He read the brand," answered Steve, with a grin. "I told you he was intelligent."

That night as Steve was making down his bed, Rob-



The day herd now numbered between one and two thousand head. These were trailed

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inson who was going to share it with him, approached and asked:

"Say, how much is a horse like that one you rode to-day worth out here?"

"Well, as cheap as horses are now, you can get all you want of them for about thirty-five dollars apiece."

"Well, if that is the case, I see where I recoup the family fortunes," said Robinson.

"How is that?"

"Why, these cow ponies would make good polo ponies, and they bring all the way from one hundred to a thousand dollars apiece, and some extra-fine ones even more. The horse must be quick and handy, and level-headed, so that he will not lose his head when in a close place. That gray horse you rode to-day would make a splendid polo pony. If you want to go in with me we can buy up a few head and train them this winter, having them ready to ship East in time for the spring games. We might make a good thing out of it, if we can get the horses as cheap as you say."

The word "East" settled the matter for Steve. "All right, I'll go you," agreed he. "As soon as the round-up is over we can start picking them up here and there. It won't take long to get several car-loads of pretty well-bred horses."

At last the round-up was about over. They had worked their way almost to the Kansas line, and the day herd, which comprised the beef steers and any cattle which had strayed off their natural range, had been daily increased until now it numbered between one and two thousand head.

These were trailed slowly along during the day, like a lot of soldiers on a leisurely march, straggling across the country. Three or four cowboys, whooping and shouting, directed their course, preventing them from

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straying, or being joined by cattle off the range, which did not belong in the herd.

The rest of the cowboys worked the country through which they were passing, cutting out beef cattle or strays and branding the season's crop of calves. All took turns night herding, working in four shifts, three at a time. Steve, Robinson and Billie had the last guard, which commenced about half past two and continued until they were relieved by the day herders.

It was always the darkest part of the night when they held guard, and one morning as they went on duty, the earth as usual was shrouded in the thick dusk which precedes the dawn. It was unusually warm for the time of year, and they rode round and round the sleeping herd, which were placidly chewing their cud and sighing in well-filled content.

Steve and Billie were cheerily whistling or singing to assure them that friends were guarding their slumbers, while Robinson was jogging along half asleep with loose rein, trusting to the well-trained cow pony to keep the proper distance from the herd.

Suddenly the horse put both front feet in a prairie dog hole and fell over on his side, pitching Robinson headlong toward the cattle. Instantly a cow jumped up, and with a startled bellow attempted to vault over the one next to it, which jumped up at the same time. In the scramble that followed, the whole herd became frightened and rushed away in the opposite direction from camp, sweeping Steve and Billie along with it.

Robinson, much dismayed, got up and finding neither his horse or himself were injured, mounted and started in pursuit, followed by the rest of the cowboys who had been startled from their morning nap by the stampede.

From the pounding of thousands of feet on the hard

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earth, there arose a rumbling as of distant thunder, and drowned all other sounds, but two quick flashes told that Steve and Billie were unhurt and in the lead. The others drew their revolvers and fired an answering salute, and putting their horses into a run, passed the herd and joined the two in front.

For awhile they did not attempt to turn them, but riding to the right or left, pointed in the leaders so as to keep the herd from splitting or scattering. It was mostly composed of beef steers and cows with calves following, and they soon began to slow down, and the horsemen had no difficulty in keeping in the lead.

As dawn approached and they could see that the cattle were showing signs of fatigue. The cowboys spread out along one side and quirting the leaders and shooting into the ground close to their ears, gradually worked them around to the left, but the rest refused to follow, and ran straight ahead, leaving some of the men on each side, with Robinson and Steve galloping along in the lead.

Suddenly they came to a deep gully. Steve's horse took it at a flying leap, but Robinson's mount missed his footing and fell, and for the second time that night, pitched his rider over his head. This time he fell with an arm crumpled under him. It snapped like a twig, and he lay in the path of the oncoming herd, groaning with pain. The pounding of their feet roused him to his peril, and jumping up, found that his horse had bolted. He looked wildly about for a moment, and seeing no other hope, gathered himself together, and sprinted along in front, shouting to Steve, who was some distance ahead.

The excited cattle seeing a man on foot, began to toss their heads and quickened their pace. Steve saw the danger, whirled his horse, and returned straight in the face of the bellowing herd. He swung his horse

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around Robinson, and reaching down, caught hold of the sound arm, and helped him to swing himself on behind.

The leaders of the herd were now close upon them. Steve dug in his spurs and urged his horse onward, but hampered by the double burden he could not outstrip the maddened cattle. Soon horse and riders were wedged between their heaving sides, and were raked and pricked by the tossing horns.

Seeing that one misstep of the horse would plunge them beneath the trampling feet, Steve caught hold of the horns of a steer that was puffing alongside, and swung himself onto its back, then turning to his startled companion, said:

'You get over into the saddle and let the horse work his way to the front. When you get out ride like the devil until you get out of the way.'

"And leave you here? I guess not," objected Robinson.

"Oh, I'm in no danger now. The boys will get the cattle to milling pretty soon, and then I'll get out. But you are hurt and all this jolting and crowding ain't doin' you any good."

Robinson worked his way out as Steve advised. When Ira saw him and found out where Steve was, he took Robinson's horse, which one of the boys had caught, and rode out in front of the herd opposite. Slowing up, he let the cattle crowd around him and Steve made his way to him by swinging himself from the back of one steer to another. When he was in the saddle they took advantage of an opening in the ranks nearest them, and made their way to the front.

By this time the other cowboys had gradually swung the cattle round until they had them running in a circle, or milling, as it is called.

As soon as they had the cattle quieted down, they

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horses .

bound up Robinson's arm as best they could, and the first ranch they came to Steve borrowed a buggy and took him to the nearest doctor. When the arm was set then they started for the "—G" Ranch.

XVIII

STEVE GETS A LETTER

When Miss Parker reached New York she did not at once tell her mother of her engagement, as she was too ill to hear anything that would be likely to disturb her, but as she talked of her trip and the name "Steve" appeared with more or less frequency in the conversation, the shrewd old lady by judicious questioning soon found out how matters stood. She said never a word of objection at first, but asked for time to think it over before expressing an opinion.

Day after day, while confined to her bed, she led the girl to talk of her trip to the West, and particularly of her lover and his people. At last she was able to be tucked in her wheel chair, and when it was drawn up before the open grate, she asked her daughter to come and sit on the stool at her feet. They sat thus for a long time, and at last with a sigh the old lady broke the silence and speaking in a weak, reluctant voice, said:

"Listen to me, my child. You know I love you better than life itself, and if it was in my power to make this beautiful dream of yours come true, I would gladly do so. But should I give my consent to your marrying this man, I fear it would only serve as a key to unlock for you the gate to untold misery.

"It is not the man I am objecting to, but what goes

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with him. I know you would not love him if he was not all that a man should be, and if he had been born and brought up in the same environment as yourself, I would not say a word, as then you would stand a chance of being happy together."

She paused and gazed long into the flames, waiting for her daughter to speak, and then as she did not do so, continued:

"Matrimony is not as easy as courting, and love can not take the place of everything in a woman's life. It serves for a time, but the daily grind of poverty, coupled with hard work and uncongenial surroundings, puts a great strain upon it.

"When the hardship falls equally upon both, then it often brings them closer together, but it so seldom does. If you marry and go out there to live, you will be giving up everything that has gone to make your life happy heretofore.

"He would be living in the same place where he was born and brought up, with all his friends and relatives around him, and would not understand that it might be hard for you to adapt yourself to your now environment.

"Adversity and hardship often chastens people and some it converts into saints, but I do not believe you are one of those people. You cannot easily adjust yourself to circumstances, but are always trying to fit your surroundings to yourself, and if you could not do it, then you would be utterly wretched and everybody around would be made to feel it.

"You talk about being poor, my child, you do not know what poverty means. Your idea of poverty is to have all the money you want to spend.

"My dear, give up this idea. You are young and have been carried away by the romantic wooing. Take time to think it over before you bind yourself irre-

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vocably. I will never give my consent as long as I live, and perhaps by the time I die you will think differently, or circumstances may have changed."

By the time she had ceased speaking, the girl had pillowed her head on her mother's lap and was weeping stormily. Each heartbroken sob was an agony to the sorrowing old lady, who stroked the soft black hair with trembling hand. Gradually the girl grew moer calm, and as the fire died down in the grate, leaving the room in darkness, she arose and wheeled the mother's chair into her room. Then when she had her safely tucked in her bed, she stooped and kissed her, saying:

"Mother, dear, do not worry. I will take time as you say. I know that as you sit, day after day, tied helplessly to your chair, you are given a clearer insight into human affairs, than people who have not so much time to think. I will try and abide by your decision. At least I will do nothing hurriedly.

When Steve and Mr. Robinson reached the "—G" Ranch, Steve at once inquired about letters, and found several from New York. These he read and finding that it was mail-day and no one had been to the post-office, he saddled a horse and went after the mail, as he judged from the number of letters he had received that there would be one there for him.

Instead of one, he received two bearing the New York post-mark. One in the now familiar writing of his sweetheart, and the other in a faltering, shaky hand. Much puzzled he put the latter aside, and hastily opened the other, and went closer to the dim smoky lamp to read it.

My lover: You know I wrote you that when I told my mother of our love, she asked for time in which to consider it before she gave her decision.

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Well, last night she told me, and oh, my dear, she does not consent. She is writing you herself, stating her reasons, so I need not go into the heart-breaking details.

Whether her ideas are right or not, they will serve as long as she holds them and, I fear, keep us apart, for as I told you long ago, I am all she has and I could not desert her in her old age and helplessness. I should have known better than to bid you hope, but, as she says, "I was carried away by the romantic wooing and surroundings," and forgot all about the barrier that stood between us, for even if she was willing, I well know that a ranch is no place for the old or infirm.

The life is strenuous, and calls for men and women of splendid untried youth and courage. So, between love and duty our dream ends. It was foredoomed from the start, and as I look ahead I see no hope, unless you can find a ray with your clearer vision.

And now no more for this time. It is needless to say that I shall continue to write to you, and your letters will be my dearest consolation.

Yours, as ever,

ELOISE.

As Steve read the letter a tense, drawn look came into his face, and as one resolved to learn the worst and get it over with, he tore open the mother's letter, which was more or less a repetition of the talk she had with her daughter a few evenings before.

When he had read it he walked out to his horse like one in a daze, forgetting to say good-night to the others who had come for their mail, one of whom remarked as he went out:

"Old Steve looks like he's had a knockout blow."

He rode swiftly homeward, little heeding where he went. Darkness hid the familiar scene, and his soul

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was wrapped in an oblivion no less profound. Once he straightened himself in the saddle, bared his head to the cool breeze, and gazed up at the stars as if in mute appeal.

His heart was filled with love and longing and in his extremity, the twinkling stars seemed to mock him. While he looked up at them the cloud that obscured the moon shifted slightly, so changing its appearance and accentuating its shadows until there seemed to be a round and jovial face grinning down at him.

"I don't blame you for laughin', old boy," said Steve. "You and them stars have seen some might curious things, while you have been watchin' this old earth, but I guess the queerest of all is the way a man nowadays lets some slip of a girl deal him misery.

"Now, that cave man I read about the other day could give us cards and spades. He simply cut a likely lookin' fillie out of the herd, and if she was skittish and not halter broke, he would walk up to her kind of casual like, all the time talkin', soothin', holdin' in one hand a necklace made of bear's claws, or a bright feather, or something to attract her attention, from the club he was holdin' behind his back in the other hand.

"When he got close enough he swung the club around quick and tapped her on the head, and when she had quit kickin' tucked her under his arm, and carried her off to his cave.

"But, me, I can't do that. Us cow-punchers are supposed to be half way civilized anyhow. So I'll have to take my medicine and grin as though I liked it. But I'll tell you, old pal, I'd like to be a cave man for a day. He sure was the wise old guy."

That night for the first time in his life, Steve knew what it was to suffer from insomnia. He tossed about,

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going over again and again the different passages of her letter, which were stamped upon his brain as though they had been written with fire. Against the slender hope of her continued letters, he balanced the suggestion that she had been carried away by the romantic wooing and surroundings, which he supposed referred to their betrothal on the summit, and groaned aloud as he recalled her clinging arms and sweet kisses.

If it was only some man that had come between them, he thought, fiercely, how he would delight to punch his head. But how could he urge her to oppose the wishes of her mother, who had the double appeal of being old and a helpless invalid, for whom it was her manifest duty to care.

Then through his despair, came the remembrance of Robinson and his remark about buying polo ponies, and the probable financial gains therefrom. This recalled a clause in the old lady's letter, and jumping out of bed, he lit the lamp and searched through its pages until he found the one he wanted.

"I have told my daughter that I should never give my consent while I lived, and by that time you both might have changed your minds, or your circumstances might have changed."

"What does she mean by that?" mused he to himself, as he climbed back into bed. "Does she mean she might give her consent if I was working at something else. If that is the case, I'll see that I do." And with that slight consolation he went to sleep.

Immediately upon awaking the next morning, he sought out Robinson and sounded him on the subject of buying polo ponies, and finding him still enthusiastic, went out and rounded-up all the "G" horses he could find, and tried them out, while Robinson sat upon a wagon and watched.

XIX

MISS LITTLE PROPOSES

"Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not from love." Robinson with his plan for buying and training cow-horses into polo ponies was a welcome diversion for Steve. As they drove about from one neighbor to another, his inward discontent vented itself and found surcease in driving sharp bargains, and for the time, at least, he was almost happy. But now and then as they drove along, he would lapse into silence almost saturnine and, Robinson, wondering, respected his mood.

However, when at the ranch, he had no chance to be melancholy. Thanksgiving was to be a family reunion, and a few days before his sisters who were in Denver going to school, came home, bringing with them several girl friends. With their arrival, the program of the evening was changed. The boys, instead of trooping out to the bunk house as soon as supper was over, to play poker and tell stories, now joined the fun in the house, in all of which Pere and Mere Gardeau, heartily co-operated. The day before Thanksgiving the married daughter, who lived at a distance, arrived with her husband and children, and Robinson, used to the circumscribed hospitality of the Cities, marveled at the Western liberality, and the

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seemingly unlimited capacity of the Gardeau home. Like the fabled omnibus 'there was always room for one more.'

Through all the bustle and confusion, the preparations for the feast the following day went steadily onward. Each new arrival as soon as the greetings were over, donned a big gingham apron, and joined the others in the roomy kitchen, where they stirred and mixed with unabated precision, while they exchanged family reminiscences.

Thanksgiving morning dawned with an ominous prophesy of storm. Thick fog shrouded the hills, and enveloped the countenances of the young people in a gloom no less profound. They had planned a dance for the evening, as a wind-up to the day's festivities, and loud were their lamentations over the prospect of being disappointed.

However, as the morning advanced, it began to look as though they would have a crowd no matter what the weather. One by one dim shapes began to appear through the mist, and took the form of galloping horsemen as they drew nearer. They came singly, or in groups of twos or threes. Lithe, sinewy fellows. Their tanned faces glistening from the recent application of razor and soap.

Each man as he awoke that morning, had sized up the prospects of the weather with the eye of a prophet who doubts, but who does not intend to take any chances, and after bolting a hasty breakfast, saddled up his horse and set forth on his journey toward the "—G" Ranch. They lost no time on the way, lest the blizzard of which the fog was a forerunner, start, and prevent their reaching their destination.

Flint expressed the sentiment of the rest, when he called to Steve:

"What-you-may-call-it-in-there, lend me your razor.

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I was so afraid it'd storm so I couldn't get here, that I didn't take time to shave."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Ira, who was standing near. "It'd shore have to be a pretty hard blizzard that would keep me away, with all these girls here, and the chance of gettin' one of Mere Gardeau's famous dinners thrown in, but it won't have to storm very hard to keep me from goin' home."

Presently the sun, as if unwilling to share the approbrium of spoiling the day, struggled through and dispelled the mist, revealing dark, overhanging clouds mantling the sky to the north.

The Colwells drove up just in time for dinner, and with them was Miss Little, who for reasons of her own wished to spend the vacation in the country, but with characteristic plausibility and disregard for truth, had excused herself to her mother with the statement that the school board had decided not to give any holiday.

The dining table was opened out to the fullest extent and more leaves added and, that not sufficing, was supplemented by a smaller one from the kitchen. The whole, covered with a snowy cloth, stood groaning under the weight of the Thanksgiving dinner. An immense turkey graced either end, as it was not compatible with the Gardeau courtesy to make the hungry guests wait until one person could carve enough for them all.

They were all standing behind their chairs waiting to be seated when Robinson appeared with a bottle of champagne. He had learned that the Gardeau's followed the French custom of serving wine at meals, and wishing to make some return for the care and many kindnesses Mere Gardeau had showered upon him, had sent to Denver and ordered a case of the sparkling beverage, which had only just arrived.

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While they were pouring it, Miss Little watched them with a puzzled, intent expression on her face, as if searching for an idea which all the time eluded her. Robinson, who happened to glance at her, wondered at the sudden flash of relief and cunning that spread over her face for an instant, as the last glass was filled.

Miss Little had more brains than she let appear to the casual observer. This cleverness, coupled with the subtle allure of sex which she possessed in a remarkable degree and her undoubted prettiness had enabled her to make easy conquests of the boyish hearts in her crowd at high school. From this she evolved the philosophy 'that no man was hard to get, if a clever woman wanted him.'

She reasoned that it was her tactlessness alone that had kept Steve from proposing when they were snow-bound at the sheep camp the spring before, and now with propinquity to help her, she anticipated little difficulty in spite of the fact that she had heard rumors of an engagement between him and Miss Parker.

No one knew better than she how delicate were the gossamer threads that bound two loving hearts together, and how easy they were to break. She had thought long and hard, trying to evolve some ingenious ruse to entrap Steve, but until the flash of inspiration at sight of the champagne, the only result had been a few puckers between her eyes, and the loss of several hours of beauty sleep.

The champagne stood by her plate bubbling and effervescing, and save to twirl the slender stem of the glass between her fingers once or twice, she never touched it. However, this served to attract the attention of Pere Gardeau to her abstinence, and through him the rest of the table, which was what she desired. He inquired:

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"Why don't you drink your champagne, it is gettin' stale?"

"I do not care for it," answered she demurely.

"Perhaps you would rather have some of the punch?" suggested Mere Gardeau. And calling one of her daughters, she requested her to replace the champagne with a glass of punch, but to this Miss Little objected also, although they assured her it was only composed of the juices of fruits.

Presently tiny particles of snow began drifting slowly past the window, each one glistening in the sunlight like a beautiful crystal. Before dinner was over the wind came sweeping down from the north with a roar, and the threatened blizzard was in progress. Everybody hovered around the stoves, as they could not go out to the corrals and have a bucking contest as was the usual case when a lot of cowboys got together.

However, nobody was dull. All kinds of games were soon in progress, and now and then somebody would pass refreshments in the way of champagne, cake, candy and nuts, while the bowl of punch sat on nearby table where all could help themselves. Presently one of the boys hunted up a mouth harp. Shoving the tables back out of the way, and taking up the rung, they soon had a dance in progress in the large dining room.

Throughout it all Miss Little had steadfastly refused to partake of the punch, and with young folks in a merry mood, anything will do for a joke, so they dubbed her the "Teetotler."

Along about six o'clock the wind died down, and the snow stopped. The clouds drifted away, leaving the sky clear, and as the moon rose, vehicles began to arrive, their tires squeeking musically through the dry snow.

MISS LITTLE PROPOSES

Long ago, with each ranch overrun with young people, they had felt the need of a place to hold their weekly dances, so a number of the neighbors contributed enough money to erect a hall. Pere Gardeau generously gave them a sight down in the trees near the creek, and it was there that the dance was to be held that night.

Miss Little having learned wisdom from her former experiences the winter before, had brought along a dress of soft, white, non-crushable material, which clung to her figure bringing out every alluring curve, and when she reached the dance was easily the prettiest and best-dressed girl there.

Steve had not thought of her after leaving her at the Colwell Ranch at the opening of school. He had been engrossed with the occasional letters he had received from Miss Parker while on the round-up, and his allegiance never wavered. Since he had returned he had been too hurt and grieved over the toppling of his bright castle of dreams to think of anything else, when he allowed himself to think at all. That was what he strove to do to keep from thinking, and toward that end, with the champagne handy, he had been doing what a great many people call "drowning their sorrows." However, he possessed one trait which many people consider the first requisite of a gentleman. He could drink without showing any ill affects, and save for a little unusual hilarity, there was nothing in his behavior that would indicate that there was anything amiss.

All afternoon he had not been especially conscious of Miss Little's presence, but now as she slipped out of her long thick coat, like a bright moth emerging from its cocoon, Steve, who was assisting her, felt steal over him like a wave the subtle attraction, which she

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seemed to radiate. He stepped forward involuntarily, and she noting it, blushed warmly.

During the evening she was eagerly claimed by one partner after another, and toward all but Steve she maintained an air of mischievous coquetry. To him alone, she showed a softening of manner which was the most delicate flattery, and he left her after each dance with a quickened pulse and a delicious expectancy, which hastened his return to ask her for another.

He claimed her for the midnight supper, and when the punch was passed and she still refused, they all began rallying her on her teetotalism again. This was the opening for which she was looking, and in an undertone she began explaining to Steve the reason for her eccentricity.

"I hope you will not think me a prude," said she, with an appealing inflection in her voice. "But the last year in high school each girl as she graduated made a vow to accomplish some good. As one of the girls had a brother who was a drunkard, through her influence we all vowed to discourage all use of intoxicating liquors, and by all means never to touch it ourselves. So that is why I refused to taste the champagne to-day, and as I saw one of your brothers pour some brandy in the punch when he thought no one was looking I could not take any of that either.

"I am afraid I offended your mother by not drinking it, but I could not break my vow. And then speaking a little louder as the music started up, and they arose to take their places on the floor, she continued: "There was to be only one instance in which we could partake of wine, and that was when we became engaged." And then looking up at him with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, and dropping her voice so that he had to stoop to hear what she said as his

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arm encircled her waist for the waltz, she murmured:

"I did want some of that champagne. It looked so delicious. Won't you be engaged to me for the evening so as to absolve me from my vow, and I can taste it."

"Sure," answered Steve, with a laugh. "Here, stop the music and bring on that champagne, he called to Ira. "Miss Little and I are going to celebrate our engagement."

And amid much laughter, and the popping of champagne corks they jestingly pledged each other over their brimming glasses. At least Steve was jesting, and Miss Little claimed she was.

Pere Gardeau, hearing of the engagement, and not of the jest, approached Mere Gardeau and said:

"You had better go and greet your new daughter, that is, to be. They say Miss Little and Steve are engaged, and they might feel hurt if you wait any longer." And so with the best intentions in the world, Mere Gardeau approached to kiss and welcome Miss Little into the family.

The girl gave Steve a searching glance, and he sobered, whispered reassuringly:

"Go on with it. We can tell them different later."

Then as his sisters approached one by one, he saved the situation by saying:

"Here you folks keep back. I haven't kissed her myself yet, and you can get yours after I get my share—if there's any left," and calling to the musicians to start up, he put an end to the scene.

There was one member of the family who did not come up to congratulate them, and that was Blackie. When he learned the cause of the music being stopped he shoved his clenched hands deep into his pockets and stood by the door glowering. When Mere Gardeau went up to kiss Miss Little, he wheeled and went out

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into the darkness, and stumbled hurriedly toward the ranch.

Going into the barn he saddled the first horse he came to, a half-broken colt, which when he led it out into the cold and mounted went off rearing and plunging. But in temper, at least, the man and beast were in harmony, and for a time it was doubtful which would be the master? Finally Blackie triumphed, and in doing so, some of his anger cooled, leaving room for an aching disappointment. He rode blindly, paying no attention to the direction his horse took, and the next morning no one knew what had become of him, but as they supposed he had gone home with some one from the dance, Steve and Robinson went off on a trip to Wyoming to buy horses, as they had previously planned.

Kiowa boasted a weekly paper, called the "Divide Review," and that paper had an enterprising editor, who was always on the lookout for news, and happening to be at the Thanksgiving dance, the next issue which came out on the following Saturday, had a full account of the engagement and the way it was announced.

The next Monday noon, one of the Colwell boys rode up to the post-office and got the mail, and in looking over the paper, Miss Little saw the article, and read it over and over with increasing satisfaction.

"Here," thought she, "is a means of ending the affair between Miss Parker and Steve." And then after hesitating a moment she observed:

"Why not. 'All is fair in love and war,'" and putting all scruples aside, she did the paper into a neat little roll, and so as to make the news more affective, carefully imitated Steve's handwriting, and addressed it to Miss Parker. That evening after school she

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called one of the boys who went up past the post-office and asked him to mail it for her, saying:

"Here is a bundle which the folks at the ranch wanted me to have one of you take up for them."

XX

MISS PARKER AND REGGIE BECOME ENGAGED

When Miss Parker watched Reggie take his departure from the Alton Ranch she had made the remark that she supposed that was her last chance of becoming a millionairess, but Reggie was at the station to meet her when she arrived, and at once renewed his suit. Perhaps that might have been one of the reasons for her mother refusing to countenance an engagement between her daughter and Steve, but if so, she was too shrewd to let it appear.

Miss Parker had received but one letter from Steve in the week that had elapsed since she had written him of her mother's decision. When she at last heard the postman's whistle, for the sound of which she had been nervously listening all morning, she picked up the key to the mail box, and hurried down stairs. But there were no letters, only a paper, which being too large to slip through the opening, was stuffed in at the top.

"No letter," said she ruefully, carelessly turning the paper over and then catching sight of the writing, some of her disappointment vanished, and she exclaimed:

"Oh, I see, he has sent me a paper. Ned used to say that a cow-puncher would rather ride twenty miles any day than write a letter, and perhaps Steve dislikes it as much as the rest, and has sent me a paper instead, to

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give me the news. But it is not news, printed in dead, lifeless type that I want. It is the personal note, written by hand, with the love pulsing behind each word, but where is the man who ever understood that," exclaimed the girl, sighing as she hastily slipped off the wrapper.

Finding no article specially marked she waited until she was in her sitting-room before looking it over. The paper was composed of only one double sheet, and stepping by the window for a better light she glanced through it, and soon found the article. When she had read it she sank weakly down on the couch with a gasp.

"Well, of all things. Steve and Miss Little are engaged, and he has had the audacity to send me a paper announcing it, instead of writing himself. Well, I suppose he knows there is an answer to that. He shall soon find that I will not wear the willow for any man, and going to the telephone she called up Reggie's number, and when he was on the phone, said:

"Hello! That you, Reggie? I just called up to tell you that I would marry you, and you can announce the engagement at once."

"What!" exclaimed Reggie, staggered by the news. "What did you say?" and when she had repeated the message, Reggie without stopping to inquire what had caused this sudden change of mind, answered:

"All right, I will announce it at once. Have it in all the evening papers to-night. But, say, what date shall I set for the wedding?"

At this Miss Parker, who had only been thinking of getting even with Steve, and not of the outcome of an engagement to Reggie, faltered for a moment, and then plucking up courage, laughed lightly into the phone, saying:

"Greedy. Haven't you heard enough good news for

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one day. Go ahead and announce the engagement, and we can talk about the rest later." And as Reggie was for hurrying right over, she objected:

"No, don't come, I am going out. No, don't come this evening, either. I have an appointment. Don't come until to-morrow morning."

Reggie much puzzled, finally consented to postpone his visit until next day, and Miss Parker after hanging up the receiver, went to her room, threw herself on the bed and buried her head in its pillows. Although she wept, she did not waver in her resolution, and when the evening papers came, selected one, and when she had blue-penciled the announcement, folded it so that would be the first thing seen when the paper was opened, and addressed it to Steve. Then in order to make sure of its being sent, she put on her hat and coat and went out and dropped it in the mail box herself.

Seeing the paper which had caused all the trouble laying on the stand, she snatched it up, and was about to destroy it when she hesitated, thought better of it, and slipping on the wrapper put it with the package of letters which she had received from him.

After spending a sleepless night, she was in little mood to grant Reggie the privileges of an accepted lover when he called the next morning, and presented a cold cheek for his ardent salutation, and with this he had to be content.

Steve, off with Robinson buying horses, did not attempt to have his mail forwarded, as he was moving about from place to place, but contented himself with writing Miss Parker regularly as before, and these Miss Parker as regularly returned with the seals unbroken. With the receipt of each one she became more furiously angry with him, but now and then she felt a temptation to steam one open and see what ex-

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cuse he had to offer for his perfidy, but dismissed the suggestion as dishonorable, and an act beneath the dignity of a lady.

Had she only yielded to her curiosity she would have been puzzled at the tone of Steve's letters, which were in the same loving strain as formerly, and her acute mind might have divined that there was something amiss. However, pride forbade, so she demanded no explanation, acting just as Miss Little thought she would, and so much misery was in store for all concerned.

When Steve reached home a couple of weeks later, as usual the first thing he did was to inquire for mail, and finding several letters from New Yorkfi, and a roll of papers, gathered them all together and started out to the bunk house to read them. As he was going out to the kitchen door, he encountered his mother, who true to her French training could not reconcile herself to the lightness with which American youths regarded affairs of the heart. She had noted with frowning disapproval the arrival of each letter from New York since the public announcement of Steve's engagement to Miss Little, and seeing the eagerness with which he hurried out to read them, stopped him with the remark:

"My son, do you think it honorable to correspond with one girl while engaged to another?"

"Correspond with one girl while engaged to another?" repeated Steve in a puzzled tone. And then all at once it burst upon him that people accepted his engagement to Miss Little as a fact, and he was stopped with the thought that since Miss Little had not denied it, he could hardly do so without putting her in a bad light, so answering nothing he went on out.

Hastily tearing open one of the envelopes on the

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way, he drew out the contents and was surprised to find only one of his own letters to Miss Parker? He turned it over and over in bewilderment for awhile, and then looked into the envelope to see if there was any message to explain the matter, but finding nothing, opened another envelope with the same result. One after another yielded only the various letters which he had written while away buying horses, and at last he tore open the bundle of papers to see if there was anything in them to enlighten him. The blue-penciled article caught his eye and he read it, crushed the paper in his hand with an oath, and then jerking open the stove door, he shoved both paper and letters into the fire and watched it burn, while he muttered imprecations against Reggie and the fickleness of women.

The next day being mail-day, some one asked him if he was not going to the post-office, and he growled out: "Hell, no. I never want to see that post-office again."

The family noting his mood, did not venture to tease him about his engagement to Miss Little, but noticed with no little surprise that he did not seem to be making any preparation toward going to the dance which was to be held at the hall that night. At last some one inquired:

"Aren't you going after Miss Little?"

"I don't know as I am," answered Steve. "Why?"

"Well, if you don't some of the other fellows will," replied his brother, "and I shouldn't think you'd want her goin' with anyone else, when you've announced your engagement."

"That's so. I believe I am engaged. I had forgotten all about it," said Steve, with a chuckle. "Guess I had better go and get her." And laughing still more at the bewildered look on the faces of his mother and

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father, he went out and hitched up a horse to the buggy and started over to Colwell's.

Miss Little had heard indirectly that he was back from his trip, and like a gambler who has taken long chances, realized the crucial moment had come. If he came for her she would know that he had not discovered the trick she had played. She went to her room directly after supper, and proceeded to get ready for the dance, so that if he came the Colwells would think it was a prearranged plan, and her position would be that much more strengthened. But should he not, then she would simply undress and go to bed, and they would not know that she had expected him. She had almost given up hope of his coming and had been waiting in a fever of impatience, when she heard the sound of wheels approaching on the hard gravelly road, and presently Steve's voice in the kitchen asking for her. When Mrs. Colwell knocked on her door, she had on her cloak and was standing before the mirror busily draping a soft filmy scarf about her head.

She gave Steve a quick, searching glance as she greeted him, and noting his look of deep dejection, quacked inwardly. But as he did not seem to connect her with his trouble, she became more assured in her mind, and as they drove toward the hall, chatted merrily. Gradually she beguiled him from his taciturn mood, and as they neared the "—G" Ranch and he had not mentioned the engagement, she broached the subject herself, saying:

"We must tell the people to-night that our announcement Thanksgiving day was a joke. It will not do to let it go any farther. I should have done so at once only I was afraid it would offend your people. Make them think I was trifling with you."

And so with these few sentences she put herself back into the position of the pursued. And showed herself

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mistress of the world-old tactics of her sex, who make the first advance and then retreat, until the man becomes so lost in the excitement of the chase that he forgets that he was ever anything but the pursuer. Steve remembering the unaccountable action of Miss Parker, and thinking this a chance to get even, rose to the bait like a hungry trout, and said:

"Why not let it stand? I have no objection if you haven't."

"But I have," she had the wisdom to reply. "My husband shall never say that I proposed to him, even in jest."

She could not have said anything more calculated to stimulate his interest. If she had expressed herself as willing to let the engagement stand, he would have felt the tolerant contempt which his sex feels for a woman who honestly expresses a preference in regard to themselves. But Miss Little was clever enough to know this, and while her heart beat joyously at his assertion, she still maintained that it was all a joke, and that they should tell the people at the dance that it was."

Presently Fred Knox came up to Steve, and observed:

"Miss Little says you folks was jestin' the other night."

"Sure," answered Steve. "Didn't you know that matrimony was a joke, and that anybody that takes it seriously is soon a fit subject for the insane asylum. Whenever a girl tells you that she will marry you, you want to laugh, because that is what it is 'a joke'." And Fred detecting the note of bitterness in his voice, said:

"Yes, I see it's a joke. But who played it. The one that was comin' or a goin'."

"Both," answered Steve, as he turned away, his reply more true than he knew.

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All during the evening different ones would chafe them about their engagement, but Steve according to his ideas of chivalry, could do nothing but turn it off in some way, while Miss Little lost no opportunity to tell every one that it was a joke, leading people to think that Steve was the anxious one, while she was indifferent.

On the way to the Colwell Ranch, after the dance, she, having heard Steve several times during the night inquiring of the different ones if they had seen anything of Blackie, asked:

"Where is Blackie? Has he disappeared?"

"Yes. He disappeared Thanksgiving night, and we haven't seen him since."

"Thanksgiving night! At what time?"

"Sometime after supper," and then as a sudden thought struck him, he looked at her intently, and said: "By Gee, I never thought of that."

"Never thought of what?"

"That he might have gone away on account of us sayin' we was engaged."

"Well, if he has, it's his own fault. He is a man and if he chose to delude himself no one is to blame but him."

"Are you right sure no one is to blame? Don't you think you helped along the deludin' a little?"

"And supposing I did?" flared she, in a sudden burst of anger. "Isn't a man a living temptation to a girl of spirit. There won't one of you look at a girl unless you think a dozen other fellows want her. Let a girl play square, and discourage all attention from every fellow except the one she chances to like, and that one immediately takes alarm and shies off. But if she is clever and encourages them all, and has the strength of character to treat the one she likes with

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the same indifference as she treats the one she does not like, she is sure to win.

"A man likes to see his judgment verified, and what no one else wants, neither does he. I have often had some handsome fellow, as a favor to me, pay devoted attention to some homely wall-flower for an evening, just to watch how the other fellows followed his lead, and sought her afterward. Men deserve no pity, in my estimation. And if a girl did right she would accept every one who proposes, until she gets the right one."

"Well, why don't you do that then? Accept every man who proposes."

"How do you know what I have not?"

"Well, you haven't accepted me."

"Neither have you proposed," laughed she. "As I remember it, I was the one who proposed."

"All right then, I propose," said Steve with an answering chuckle. "Do you accept?"

"No, not until you are more abject about it than now."

"Well, I can't be very abject. There ain't room in this buggy for me to get down on my knees. You might as well accept, you can bring about the abjectness later."

"No, I will not accept, but we will just continue the joke, since you find it amusing."

"All right," agreed Steve. "But seems to me you don't play the game quite fair. As I take it, you was absolved from your vow, and drank the champagne, but where do I come in. So far all I have got out of it is in the report of being engaged to you, which you take the trouble to tell every one is a joke."

"Well, what do you want?" asked she in a softened voice. Dropping at once her tone of gay banter, and leaning back against the seat, toward his shoulder. so

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that the moonlight streamed over her face and revealed her pouting lips tantalizingly near.

"What do I want?" echoed Steve. "I want what any engaged man is entitled to. My pay in kisses, and I'm goin' to get them right now."

Uttering a low laugh, which was blending of assent and challenge, she struggled to elude him. At last he had her face turned toward him, and was bending to press his lips on hers, when suddenly there flashed across his mind remembrance of that other betrothal on the mountain tops, and his heart chilled. Stifling a sigh, he kissed her, but without passion, and as he did so, it seemed he could see Miss Parker's face before him, filled with reproach.

Miss Little felt his sudden lack of ardor, and was furious with herself for yielding.

"Have I played the game so long," thought she, "to give my lips to one who kisses them half-heartedly?"

On the way home Steve marveled at himself, thinking:

"If any one had told me that I could kiss a pretty girl with as little enthusiasm I'd have told him he was a liar. Funny that I should see Miss Parker's face that a-way. She sure can't have any kick comin' for she set me the example." And then he went over for the thousandth time, her unaccountable action. "I sure never thought she would deal me a hand like that. If it had been Miss Little, now, I wouldn't a-been at all surprised. It must have been her mother that got around her in some way."

For some time it was in this channel his mind ran, whenever he had an opportunity to think. But after awhile the poignancy of his regret began to wear off. Love is a fire that will in time burn itself out, if no fresh fuel is supplied. Especially if the one concerned

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has other distractions in the way of companionship and work, and Steve had both.

When Miss Parker wrote him of her mother's decision, she held out the hope of her continued letters, and these would have furnished the necessary fuel to keep alive his love for an indefinite time. But on the heels of her letter came the paper containing the account of her engagement to Reggie. Thus with all hope dead Steve began to try to put her out of his mind and welcomed anything that would distract his thoughts from their gloomy channel.

Finding that Miss Little with her merry chatter helped to beguile him from melancholy he sought her society at every opportunity, and gradually began to fall under the spell of her magnetic personality. He basked in the sunlight of her smile, and no more visions of Miss Parker came to lessen the fervor of his kisses.

In this way he lost all enthusiasm over the trip to New York. He was interested in the monetary part of course, but all the zest was gone. Nevertheless, he went about training the cow-ponies, and getting them used to having the polo clubs swung over and around them. In order to give them some actual work he organized a couple of polo teams among the cow-boys, and Robinson, who was unable to use his arm enough to play, coached them in the rules of the game. As he did so he thought he never knew what polo was until he saw it played by those reckless cow-punchers.

To him, also, fell the task of exercising the various horses every day, so as to keep them worked down a little, and in order to make it more interesting he was in the habit of taking along the pack of hounds and hunting coyotes on the way. There were seven or eight dogs in the pack, and the leaders were two massive, shaggy-haired, bushy-tailed stag hounds. One

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beautifully marked with large, tawny spots over his back and head, and the other was of a very light tan color.

The spotted one called "Prince" was very good-natured, while the other was surly and cross, ready to snap or growl on the slightest provocation. Like some people his soul was attuned to sadness. When the sun had set, and the active life around the ranch had settled down for the night "The Duke" as he was called, would hunt some likely spot, preferably under somebody's window, and pointing his nose toward the moon, commence his lone and dismal lament.

This he would keep up with all sorts of variations. Sometimes swelling to a loud crescendo on the last note, and sometimes ending it in a plaintive whine, until the nerves of the one he was serenading could stand it no longer, and they would end it by throwing a boot or shoe at him.

Mere Gardeau was very superstitious, and would always say when she heard him howling that it was a sign of a death. One morning on hearing her make that remark, Steve said, with his characteristic dry chuckle.

"Yes, I think that is a fact. For if he howls like that again under my window there'll sure be a death. If it's the spirits of his ancestors he's grievin' over, as some claim, he certainly feels awful bad about them, and I don't think it's right to keep him away from them any longer."

Perhaps it was the spirit of his ancestors calling him as a short time afterwards he was found one morning walking around in a circle, and in a day or two, in spite of all Robinson's doctoring, or perhaps because of it, he died.

THEY START EAST WITH THE POLO PONIES

XXI

They had planned to start East with their horses some time the latter part of March, as that would bring them there in time to get them in shape before the polo season opened. They only intended to take enough to fill one car on the first trip, until they saw how they sold, although they had bought enough to make several cars. Boston, being Robinson's home, was the ultimate destination, and as he belonged to all the riding and polo clubs, they did not anticipate any trouble in disposing of their first load to good advantage.

School still lacked a few days of being out, and Miss Little bade Steve good-by with many inward misgivings. Of late he had fallen into the roll of an accepted lover, but before doing so he had with characteristic honesty, told her the ins and outs of his affair with Miss Parker, and as far as he knew, the manner of its ending. Miss Little at once surmised that Miss Parker's action was but the outcome of her own little ruse, but stifling all twinges of conscience, had set about winning him from any thought of her rival.

She exerted every charm to please, and throwing off all restraint of manner let him see the depth of her love, thus showering him with the sweetest flattery. She listened with sympathetic admiration to all his sto-

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ries of adventure, and in a thousand winsome ways made him feel he was her hero. And when you take into consideration his isolation from any others girls that any way near compared with her in looks manner or dress, can you wonder that Steve succumbed, nor counted himself anything but lucky in so doing. After all, Miss Little was simply a pretty girl who had been spoiled and made selfish by a doting mother, and much flattery, who was using every means, legitimate and otherwise, which she possessed, to win the man she loved.

Now just as she felt she had succeeded, came this trip to the East with the horses. True he was going to Boston, and Miss Parker lived in New York, but the situation was fraught with possibilities. But all she could do was to take the chances, and trust to her luck which had not failed her so far.

Only one man was needed to look after the horses on the way, but Robinson to whom it was all novel, decided to accompany Steve as far as Chicago, and the latter was very grateful for his society, as it was a long, wearisome trip.

The long, unwiedly freight train to which their car was attached was constantly being backed onto a siding to await the coming of some passenger train, which would rush upon them out of the void, and go hurtling past. Even when they were side-tracked in some small City or village, the monotony was just as great, or even worse, for there is nothing more unlovely than the railroad section of a City. No matter how long the wait, the time of departure was always uncertain, so they were compelled to stay close by, lest the train suddenly depart without them.

But whatever hardship they encountered, Robinson, who was of a philosophic turn of mind, seemed to take it as one more event of his trip, and found it pro-

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portionately interesting. He was fond of discussing all ethical questions, and was always on the lookout for material. Spying some men stealing a ride underneath a car one day, he invited them to ride in the caboose, and gave the conductor a tip not to molest them.

He drew an interesting trio. One was a boy evidently on his first trip away from home; another was a college graduate seeking adventure, while the third was a hardened old bum of the worst type. He boasted that he had never worked in his life, and never expected to, and the color of his nose attested to the success of whatever method he adopted to procure the wherewithal to sustain life. For, like a meerschaum pipe, the nose does not reach such mellow tone without much patient endeavor, and liquor can not always be had without money.

Cards are the great leveler of mankind. Men of all classes and nationalities can meet and find entertainment in matching their wits, skill or luck, one against the other. So when they were all gathered in the slowly moving caboose, Robinson produced a pack, and in lieu of a table, they sat down in the middle of the floor and played poker.

The boy professed himself without money, so Robinson staked him, while the college man and the tramp from some inner recesses of their clothing, produced a dollar each, and laid it on the floor. As they played, strangely enough luck was with the boy, who claimed to be a novice at the game, and he won steadily. Finally as they stopped at the station, Steve went out to look after the stock, and the rest tired of such a one-sided game, followed one by one, to stretch their limbs which were cramped from so long sitting on the floor.

When the train started and they returned to the ca-

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boose the ice now having been broken, Robinson began trying to draw them out. He and the college man soon found many ideas in common, and everything was touched upon. Science, religion, politics, and last of all, love.

Steve listened for awhile, and then asked if they thought a man could love more than once.

The college man was of the decided opinion that a person could only once experience the grand passion. Robinson, being a little older was doubtful, while the boy thought it was all a myth, a specie of insanity that people indulged in as they grew up, and at last Robinson turned to the tramp and asked:

"What is your opinion?"

"Well, ye can take it from me, bo," said he addressing Steve. "Ye kin luv jist as many times as ye gits de chanst. Can ye eat enough to onct to last ye a life time?" asked he contemptuously. "No, de supply must be constant and regular, if ye wants to keep healthy and happy. Supposin' ye do like peaches an' some udder man has cornered de supply, an' only apples is handy. Ye'll have to cultivate an appetite fur apples dats all, or go hungry. An' if de apple is a good brand, even if it is a little rusty coated, after awhile ye furgits dat ye ever thot peaches was de only fruit wort eatin,' but if de supply of peaches keeps up, eat away. Each one may have a little different flavor, but dey is peaches jist de same."

Night came on and with it sleep. Everyone but the tramp removed his shoes, before stretching himself out on the hard benches of the caboose. He probably deemed such an operation as superfluous, as from each of his shoes protruded one great toe, like the head of a turtle sticking out of his shell. This waved back and forth rythmically in time to his snores and Robinson much amused lay and watched it for a time.

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Soon he too was lost in the land of dreams, and slept on undisturbed by the rocking and bumping of the caboose, as it whipped along behind the swiftly moving train.

Robinson and Steve had their own beds, but these they did not offer to share with their companions, for reasons which they thought sufficient, and the others did not seem to notice the omission.

They were all aroused suddenly the next morning at an exclamation of rage from Robinson, and looking up they burst into a shout of laughter. The tramp was missing, and so were Robinson's shoes, but he had considerably left his old ones in place of the shiny patent leathers he had purloined. The boy turning out his pockets disclosed the fact that his winnings had vanished also, so one of the tramp's methods of existence was explained.

When they reached Chicago, Robinson left Steve to make the rest of the journey alone, while he went ahead to arrange for a place to keep the horses until they were sold.

XXII

STEVE PLAYS A GAME OF POLO

We will now return to Miss Parker. After the first heat of her anger had worn itself off, she began to regret that she had consented to marry Reggie, for in spite of the fact that she thought Steve was engaged to Miss Little and did not care for her, she could not put him out of her heart, and felt more distaste than ever to marrying Reggie.

But her mother and aunt were delighted over the engagement and urged her to let it stand, bringing every argument they could think of to bear upon her. In vain she pleaded that she did not love him, and never could.

"Tut, tut!" objected her aunt. "Love is all very well, but one can't have everything. You have demonstrated to yourself that being in love does not bring happiness for very long, and now that you have had your dream, why not wake up and grasp some of the material things of life."

"Be satisfied in being adored, and contrast Reggie's devotion to Steve's fickleness. See how he has loved you through all these years, while you have steadily refused him. Don't you think such fidelity should be rewarded?"

And the girl, whose life from childhood up, had been one which tended to develop all the generosity of her nature, and unselfishness, now yielded to the importunities of the two she loved best.

And again, no woman can be indifferent to being

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loved and cared for, and there is an undoubted glamour about being the fiancée of a millionaire. Her friends looked at her with admiration and envy, and Reggie showed by every act that he had her constantly in his mind. He was always in attendance and never called empty handed, showering her with costly gifts in the way of rare flowers and precious jewels. He would have gone farther had she permitted, and bought her the latest Paris creations, as he longed to see her beauty have the proper setting, but such gifts Miss Parker would not accept. He would have to be content with her as she was, she told him. Time enough for Parisian gowns when they were married, but nevertheless she was dazzled by his munificence, and felt more inclined to yield when he pleaded for a hasty marriage.

Had he had the wisdom to absent himself now and then and have given the girl a chance to miss him, he would have helped his cause, but Reggie did not have sufficient strength of character to do that. And, as often happens, his ardor was the cause of his own undoing, or, perhaps, after all he was but the instrument in the hands of fate.

While at the Alton Ranch, he had realized that his inability to ride had placed him to great disadvantage with Miss Parker, and immediately upon reaching New York he had at once hunted up an expensive riding master and started taking lessons. However, like a great many people who would be cultured, he would have possessed the wisdom of Solomon if it could have been bought, but he was not willing to put forth the necessary effort to acquire it.

Nine o'clock in the morning was the time set for the lessons, but, as it was his boast that he never went to bed the same day as he arose, the hour usually passed with Reggie sound asleep, but the pay went on just

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the same. Finally, from the amount of money he had expended, he thought he ought to be an expert, so, chancing to visit his mother at the time, he joined one of the polo and riding clubs.

With the arrival of Robinson and his horses, interest in polo waxed to fever heat. There had always been a rivalry between the two teams, and as each man had bought one or more horses, they were anxious to try them out. Every member thought he could give points to David Harum when it came to judging horses, and there was heavy betting as to the outcome of the game.

Reggie was in a quandary. There was only one short month intervening between the date of the game and his wedding day, and, while he wanted to play in the game, he did not wish to leave Miss Parker for so long a time. Hour after hour, he sat dully before the window of an uptown club, pondering the question, and, as an aid to thought, chewed the head of his cane. Unusual agitation of mind was indicated by the fact that its polished gold knob was soon all scratched and dented. It is doubtful whether he would ever have hit upon a solution, but a friend, chancing to notice his perturbation, stopped to inquire:

"Why these deep meditations, Reggie? What great Wall Street coup are you planning now?"

"The mattah is fah more sewious than that, don-cher-know, old chap," answered Reggie, glad of a chance to unburden his mind. "I belong to one of the polo teams at Boston, and they are going to have a big game next Saturday, and I can't tear myself away from New York. I'm going to be married the first of June, don-cher-know," added Reggie, as if that was sufficient excuse to account for any eccentricity.

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"Oh, I see. Can't leave the fair charmer. Well, why don't you take her along? Your mother will put her up, I should think."

"Bah jove, old boy!" said Reggie, a look of intelligence breaking over his face. "I nevah thought of that. Evah so much obliged for the suggestion. I'll just do that." And, getting up, he left the club in a

flurry.

At last the day of the game arrived, and all was in readiness. Miss Parker and her aunt were seated with Reggie's mother in a box, and Reggie, as proud as a peacock, dashed out into the field at full speed, and then, without checking his horse, wheeled in a narrow circle and rode up alongside the barrier opposite them and lifted his helmet in salute. His mother clapped her hands in applause at this piece of horsemanship, and Miss Parker, half mocking, half serious, called to him:

"Why, Reggie, you have become quite a Rough Rider." Reggie, stopping only a moment, wheeled his horse and galloped off with a great air of importance to where the other members of his team were gathered. They wore blue shirts and blue helmets, while Robinson's club wore white shirts and white helmets.

The umpire blew a shrill whistle and tossed a white ball into the center of the ring, and the eight horsemen, swinging their long-handled clubs, dashed after it. Soon they were so closely huddled together that no one could reach the ball. Finally they opened up a bit, and a member of the Blues, with a dexterous twist of his wrist, sent the ball rolling toward their goal, but this the White Caps tried to prevent: then ensued a scramble. The ball rolled from first one end of the ring to another, pursued closely by the horsemen.

The first quarter and part of the second passed, and

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neither side had scored. At last Robinson had the ball down to their end of the field, and was about to make a goal, when Reggie in a desperate effort to prevent it, swung his club aloft, and brought it down, just as Robinson lifted his arm for the final stroke. He caught the full force of the blow, and his arm, which had recently healed, snapped and hung limp and useless by his side.

Robinson reeled in the saddle. Another of the Blues started the ball back toward their end, when the whistle blew for the intermission.

The White Caps were in despair. Robinson could not play, and they could not find a substitute. At last, in desperation, they sent a man out to look among the audience to see if they could not find some other member of the club. When he returned unsuccessful, Steve, who had been getting Robinson's horse, came up just then, and Robinson suggested:

"Steve, here, is a good player, why not put him in the game?"

"But he isn't a member of the club, and only members can play," objected one.

"Well, make him a member, then. I'll vouch for him," said Robinson. And as the time was almost up, they proceeded to swear him into the club.

The eight men, each on a fresh mount, rode back into the field, and, as the White Caps galloped across to take their position at the other end, Miss Parker uttered a slight exclamation, and, turning to Mrs. Van Rennsler, inquired:

"Who is the new man who took the place of the one Reggie hurt?"

"I don't know," answered Mrs. Van Rennsler, leveling her glasses. "He rides well, anyway." And then, handing the glasses to the girl, she said:

"See if you can recognize him."

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Miss Parker took the glasses, but before she could level them the whistle sounded and the game commenced. In the confusion which followed, she could not get the range, so she put them aside, thinking to wait until the rider should pass nearer.

"But it can not be Steve," thought she. "What would he be doing here in Boston, and a member of one of the most exclusive clubs? But whoever it is bears a striking resemblance to him." Her eyes followed him about, while her cheeks alternately paled and flushed at the memories that the resemblance invoked.

Steve had seen Reggie outside before the game started, and more than half expected Miss Parker to be present. Then, watching Reggie as he dashed up to the box, he at once decided that she was there, as Reggie was most likely making the grandstand play for her benefit.

When he entered the field he decided to avoid that side as much as possible, but presently in the excitement of the game he forgot all about it. Several times he sent the ball toward goal, but each time the other riders were bunched up, and failed to follow up his play. Becoming disgusted, he resolved that the next time he had the ball he would stay with it.

Presently he saw an opening, and with it an opportunity to humiliate Reggie as well. The ball rolled off to one side and stopped right in front of the box where Miss Parker was sitting, and he and Reggie started toward it at the same time.

Reggie tried to ride foul of Steve and shut him away from the ball, but Steve did not swerve aside. His horse, which was the same little pony which had first attracted Robinson's attention on the round-up, laid back his ears, and rushed upon Reggie's horse at a full gallop. The horses struck each other with such force

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that it threw Reggie from his precarious seat, and pitched him over the barrier. He fell at Miss Parker's feet, and the audience roared.

Miss Parker saw the furious approach and caught the vengeful gleam of eye, and, without understanding the how or why of his being there, knew instantly that it was Steve.

He heard her exclamation of surprise, and for an instant their eyes met, and then, without speaking, he bent over, struck the ball, and, riding so as to shut off the approach of the others, coaxed it on to goal.

Reggie's horse galloped down toward the entrance, and, finding the gate unguarded, ran out, where an attendant caught him just as the whistle blew for the last intermission.

The next quarter was hotly contested. Steve played as only a man can who has the incentive of humiliating a successful rival, and as the game progressed he saw what Robinson meant when he said that he never knew what polo was until he saw it played by the cowboys. Only a few of the men could ride very well, and had not the size or build to enable them to strike a good blow. Then instead of spreading out so as to be able to follow up the ball, they kept bunched together, so Steve could have played the game about as well if there had not been any of the other members of his side on the field.

His well-trained cow-pony darted about, and Steve seemed to be everywhere at once. At last Robinson's sister, who was in the box next to Miss Parker, became so excited that, as Steve came past again following up the ball, she jumped up and waved her handkerchief, shouting:

"Stay with it, you dear old cowboy." And only subsided when Mrs. Van Rennsler raised her lorgnette and stared at her. When the game was ended

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the score was four to one in favor of the White Caps.

Miss Parker lingered as long as possible, half hoping that Steve would come and speak to her, but presently Mrs. Van Rennsler, who thought she was waiting for Reggie, said:

"I suppose Reggie will meet us at the side entrance," and sure enough Reggie was there. They were soon stowed comfortably in his waiting automobile, and on the way home. Reggie insisted upon Miss Parker and her aunt going home with them for dinner, but to this the girl demurred, and so Reggie left them at their door, with a promise to return a little later and take them to the theater. He had said nothing about Steve, and Miss Parker did not question him, although she was puzzled to account for his presence in Boston.

The members of the winning team agreed to meet and have dinner together, and Robinson, in spite of the pain in his arm, which was not broken, as they had at first thought, accompanied them. When they were all seated in the cafe, they began talking over the points of the game, and all united in according to Steve the honor of having saved the day, and won the game; so they called for a bottle of champagne to celebrate the victory and drink his health.

After they were through eating, they decided to go to the theater, and, as luck would have it, selected the play which Miss Parker and Reggie had decided upon. They arrived late, but the confusion of their entrance was covered by the music of the orchestra, which stopped as the curtain went up on the first act, just as they were being seated. Steve at once gave his attention to the stage, and did not look about him until the curtain went down and the lights flashed out, lighting up the theater.

His attention was attracted to the opposite box by

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seeing that a number of people were leveling their opera glasses in that direction. He stared for a moment, and, with a start recognized Miss Parker, who, with Mrs. Van Rennsler, was sitting well forward in their box, with her aunt and Reggie behind them. It was the first time he had ever seen her in evening dress, and he gazed as if spellbound.

"Well, I knew she was beautiful," said he; "but I did not know she was as lovely as that. What a fool I was to think that a girl like that would ever be content to live on a ranch and wear gingham and calicoes. I don't wonder that Reggie, with his millions, looked good to her."

Presently she, feeling his gaze, turned and saw him in the opposite box. She blushed in confusion and then inclined her head in a stiff little bow, which he returned just as stiffly. And it was thus that these two, who a few short months before thought they had found heaven on the mountain top, greeted each other across a sea of heads.

Mrs. Van Rennsler, whose sharp eyes nothing escaped, noting the blush and bow, turned her opera glasses in that direction and drawled:

"Oh, I see. The man who substituted in the game this afternoon. Whom did you say he was?"

"I did not say," answered Miss Parker. "But it is a man I met in the West last summer."

"Well, he is an uncommonly good rider," observed Mrs. Van Reinnsler. "What is his name? I should like to meet him. I thought I knew all the members of the polo and riding clubs. Reggie, you must bring him round and present him."

"Oh, I say," exclaimed Reggie, fidgeting uncomfortably. "I do not think he is going to be here very long. He lives in the West, don't-cher-know, and besides, you can't expect me to be very keen about a fellow that

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caused me to come such a cropper this afternoon."

"Humph!" grumbled his mother, to whom opposition was like a red flag waved in the face of a bull; "Why don't you learn to ride, then, and you wouldn't fall off your horse every time any one bumped into you. But never mind. If he is not going to be here long, perhaps it isn't worth while." And, much to Miss Parker's relief, the matter was dropped.

Reggie hovered over Miss Parker like a moth about a flame, and as Steve noted it, suddenly, for the first time in his life, he knew what it was to hate, and with its coming there surged through him again the spell of his old love, which Miss Little had lulled to sleep, but not killed. And as the contest raged in his heart, he clenched his teeth and almost groaned aloud.

He knew now that there was no hope, and that he would never love any girl but this one who sat before him, and with that knowledge came the fierce desire of the primitive man—to kill this puny weakling who was trying to rob him of his rightful mate.

Shoving his chair back so that he was partially shielded by the curtains of the box, his hand instinctively sought the place where his revolver ought to be, and, not finding it, reason reasserted itself. However, as Reggie again bent over Miss Parker's chair, unable to stand the sight any longer, Steve excused himself to the others in the box, and left the theater.

He wandered around the city for a while, and then going to the stable where he put the horse he was riding the last part of the game, he started homeward.

The liveryman, seeing how the horse shied as Steve tried to lead him out of the barn, remarked:

"You had better leave him here all night. He acts like he isn't used to the city and may cause you trouble."

"I would leave him, only a party is comin' out to look at him in the morning, and I wouldn't have time

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to come in after him before he gets there. That is why I rode him, but the party could not try him out here in town, and wanted to see him on the field. Guess we can make it, all right. So long."

As he went along, the horse started and pranced at every sound or shadow. Each hydrant or waste-paper can was in his estimation some fearful monster that was ready to spring out and get him, but Steve held a steady rein and talked soothingly, and soon he quieted down somewhat. At that Steve relaxed some of his caution and fell to brooding over seeing Miss Parker at the theater, and was completely lost to time or place when suddenly, out of a side street, came a motorcycle, and shot, puffing and snapping, just behind the horse's heels. He jumped, and, taking the bit between his teeth, bolted.

The theater was out, and Reggie had left his mother at their home, and, with Miss Parker by his side, was going slowly along, in no hurry to reach his destination. The girl was making no effort to talk or be entertaining, and Reggie, left to himself, was thinking blissfully that in a short while he would have this girl for his own, and there would be no more parting.

They were just about to cross the street when, all at once, they heard a clatter of iron-shod hoofs approaching along the street to their right. Quick as a flash, Reggie threw on more speed in an attempt to make the crossing before the runaway arrived, but just as they dashed under the arc light the horse and rider loomed above them for an instant, and Miss Parker and the rider exchanged a flash of recognition, and she exclaimed:

"It is Steve!"

Steve pulled the horse back on his haunches and swung him round in an effort to avoid the car, but the

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horse, unused to pavements, slipped in making the short turn, and both he and his rider fell with a thud.

Reggie stopped the automobile, and both he and Miss Parker started to run to Steve's assistance, but before they could get out of the car, the horse was up and away, and Steve, with one foot wedged in the slender steel stirrup, and one hand holding the reins, was carried along with him, while the three stood still in the car spellbound with horror.

Suddenly Steve twisted himself over and caught the reins with the other hand, and slowly, surely, he was pulling himself toward the saddle, when another automobile dashed around the corner just ahead, and the horse, probably thinking that neighborhood had too many fearful monsters, abandoned the street and cut across lots, brushing Steve off as he ran under the low branches of an ancient pine.

The other auto stopped and they all started in pursuit of the fleeing horse, and found Steve lying where he had fallen, almost hidden by the shadows of the trees. Finding that he was unconscious, they carried him to the waiting automobiles. Putting him in the tonneau with the aunt, who held him steady, they hurried home. After they had carried him in the house and put him on a couch, Reggie went in search of a physician.

He had hardly gone when Steve sat up, and, looking dazed for a moment, said in answer to Miss Parker's protest:

"Oh, I'm all right. It takes more than a little bump on the head to kill a cowpuncher. I thought you knew that," said he, with a laugh, for the moment all remembrance of their differences jolted out of him by his fall; and then, as memory came back, the smile left his face, and, getting up and looking round for his hat, he said gravely:

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"I guess I had better be goin'. I've troubled you too much already." But, seeing that he limped as he tried to walk, both the aunt and the girl protested so vehemently that he finally sat down again.

Silence fell upon them, and the aunt, seeing their constraint, made some excuse and left them alone.

The girl was the first to recover her composure, and broke the silence with the remark:

"I have been consumed with curiosity ever since I saw you this afternoon. How do you happen to be in Boston, and a member of its most exclusive club?"

Steve gave her a brief outline of his reason for making the trip, and added in conclusion:

"We have about sold all the horses we brought along, so I guess I will be leavin' in a day or two."

"Oh, that was the reason for your coming," answered she. "When I saw you to-day, I thought perhaps you were on your honeymoon. It is not too late to offer you congratulations on your engagement, is it?"

At that Steve's face darkened angrily, and he replied:

"No, nor I hope too late for me to offer you mine. I must say it didn't take you long to change your mind, once you got back East. Not that I blame you much, when you consider all he has to offer you, but it might have been a little easier if you'd thought of that before—say before we took that campin' trip."

As he spoke, Miss Parker had become more and more amazed and angry, and, as he paused, blurted out:

"Well, I should like to know who changed their mind first? It is true I wrote you of my mother's objection, but I thought that at least I was worth waiting for, until something turned up, or mother might have changed her mind; but instead of that you come back

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at me the very next week with a paper announcing your engagement to Miss Little."

"I came back at you with an announcement of my engagement? I never sent you a paper. I never knew it was published."

"Well, you at least admit that you were engaged, and the paper was addressed in your handwriting," answered she.

"Now, hold on a minute," said Steve, upon whom light was beginning to break. "Let's get this thing straight. You say you received a paper telling about my engagement to Miss Little, the next week after you wrote me. Was you engaged to Reggie then?"

"No, I was not," answered she indignantly. "But I was immediately afterward."

"Oh, I see," said Steve, finding a reason for what had puzzled him before. "I never could understand why you dealt me such a hand as that." And then, after thinking a moment, he continued:

"Now, I don't expect you to believe me, but all I can do is to tell you the truth. That article was all a joke, or what led up to it was, and whoever sent you the paper must have done so to cause trouble. There's only one person that I know of who had any interest in sendin' it, but we'll let that go. They ain't done so much harm but what it can be undone, if we both keep cool, and listen to reason. You know, don't you? that I'd wait for you forever if I thought there was any chance, but it wouldn't need to be forever. I'd 'a' found some way round before long, and will yet, if you'll just tell me whether it was receiving that paper that made you send me the one sayin' you was goin' to marry Reggie," said he, looking at her eagerly and advancing a step.

But she, unable to answer, bent her head in assent, and he, unmindful of the cause of his limping a few

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minutes before, cleared the space between them in two long strides, and clasped her tightly in his arms, and, more in thankfulness than in passion, pressed a kiss upon her lips.

Just then they heard the approach of an automobile and soon Reggie stepped in, followed by a stranger.

From their confusion, Reggie at once realized there was something amiss, and the physician's practiced eye told him what it was, and he observed:

"I see my patient has already recovered. He looks as if he had received a liberal dose of that best of all medicine, 'Happiness,' and if he has not further need of my services, I will withdraw."

"No, I don't need you," answered Steve, grinning happily. "Much obliged just the same."

When the physician went out, the three stood awkwardly looking at each other, until at last the girl started to explain, and, becoming confused and tangled at Reggie's blank look of dismay, Steve came to her rescue, saying:

"You see, it was this way: Miss Parker and I were engaged, and she, thinking I'd thrown her over, accepted you to get even, and now, finding out her mistake, she wants you to release her."

"I'll be hanged if I will," answered Reggie, recovering his speech. "Why, man, the invitations are all out and everything. It'll make me the bloomin' laugh-in'-stock of the town. I will not stand for it."

"Well, you can sit to it, then," answered Steve. "You can't marry a girl against her will." And then, as Reggie began to get abusive, he took him by the collar and put him out of doors.

"Now that's settled, we can talk." But then the aunt, who had heard the commotion, appeared and they had to explain the situation to her, and she replied:

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"Yes, that's all very well. But you know how your mother feels about your marrying this man, and she is not likely to be any more agreeable now. So what are you going to do? You can not marry against her wishes. The shock would kill her, and you would never be happy from thinking about it. Your conscience would always reproach you. If you do not want to marry Reggie, then you do not have to, but your mother will be greatly disappointed."

"Well, I can not help it," answered the girl. "If she will not consent to Steve and me marrying, then we can wait. As soon as Steve gets through here we can go to New York and perhaps when mother meets him she will change her mind." To this the old lady shook her head in discouragement, but, seeing that there was no use arguing further, she left the room.

The next day Steve insisted upon replacing the ring Reggie had given her with one he had purchased, and, as Miss Parker protested at its size, which, while of more modest proportions than the one Reggie had given her, was yet of purer brilliancy. Steve justified himself for the extravagance by saying:

"Well, you see, you are rather valuable property, and I won't take any more chances by turnin' you loose on the range without my brand on you. I thought I'd get a good-sized one while I was about it, so that as soon as any one saw you they'd spot the ring right away. I don't want any other fellow thinkin' you are a maverick and slappin' his brand on you."

Their horses were well advertised through the polo game, so in a few days they disposed of the best of them, and, leaving the rest for Robinson to sell, Steve and Miss Parker started to New York accompanied by the aunt, who thought it best to go along, for fear the young people might take a notion to elope on the way.

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After they reached New York, and the first excitement of their reconciliation began to wear off, woman-like, Miss Parker began to dwell upon Steve's being engaged to Miss Little, and kept Steve busy explaining how it happened and trying to allay all jealousy. At last in desperation he observed:

"I guess it must have been the champagne."

"Well, you know champagne and pretty girls are not an unusual combination, and together they are very distracting. How do I know but what you may succumb again?"

"Oh, I'll swear off both, and, like Miss Little, only make an exception when you and I celebrate our marriage," agreed he with a laugh.

Miss Parker's mother still remained firm in her objection to her daughter marrying and going to live in the West, so, with many vows of constancy and promises to investigate matters in future before they jumped to conclusions, Steve and Miss Parker parted. Any way, they had the hope of seeing each other at least once a year, for Steve and Robinson had found their venture so profitable that they intended to repeat it every year. Then, too, Miss Parker might steal away for a few weeks' vacation later in the summer, and, with this hope to buoy him up, Steve started on his homeward journey, well satisfied with his trip to the East.

XXIII

THEY CAPTURE THE HORSE THIEVES

When Steve reached home from the East, he found the country in an uproar over the depredations of a band of horse thieves. Horses had been so cheap for a number of years that no one had thought them worth stealing, but since the round-up, and so many had been sold, the price had come up a little. Then, too, the thieves were not without some system in their stealing, and they evidently knew what they were about, for invariably it was a well broke cow-pony, or a young horse of good breed that was taken.

The first thing Steve did was to go out and round up his and Robinson's bunch, and found that three or four of the best ones were missing, but whether they had been stolen or had strayed off the range he could not tell. And that was the keynote of the success of the robbers. The horses ran on the open range to a large extent, and even when they were missed their owners were not sure but that they had simply wandered off their part of the range, or had been driven off by some one who was gathering his own horses.

However, the same day Steve arrived some strangers had appeared driving some horses through Kiowa, and had stopped at the saloon for a drink, and by their very boldness disarming suspicion. But late that evening the owner had ridden into town hot on their trail, and the ranchers, at last aroused, commenced to organize a posse to go hunt them.

Hearing that Steve was home, they sent him word,

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the messenger riding up just at daylight, having left Kiowa some time after midnight

Steve was in a quandary. Upon inquiry he had found that Blackie had been home on a flying visit, and he more than half suspected that he was connected with the band of horse thieves, and for that reason did not like to join in the search, for fear he would be instrumental in hunting him down.

Then, too, he wanted to see if he could discover who sent the paper to Miss Parker. He felt guilty about being engaged to two girls at the same time, but if he could find out that Miss Little really had sent it, then that would put a different color on the matter.

He had not written her since he had become reconciled to Miss Parker, and he came home by a route that did not take him through Denver, so as to avoid seeing her until he had looked up the matter.

Now, ever since Steve had left for the East, Miss Little had been suffering from remorse. Not the remorse of the person who is guilty merely, but the remorse of a person who is guilty and is about to be found out. Her intuitions told her that Steve and Miss Parker would meet in some way, and if that happened she was sure an explanation and reconciliation would follow. But there was one thing, thought she, "they will not know who sent the paper, as I disguised my handwriting perfectly."

However, there is one chance of detection which criminals do not take into consideration, and that is that no matter how well they may cover up all evidences of their crime, their minds, by dwelling on it, send out waves of thought, which, finding lodgment in some other mind, arouses a suspicion of their guilt.

In olden times people believed in dreams and visions and, regardless of any proof to substantiate them, acted upon information they received in that manner. But in

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this day of materialism we do not trust our own instinct or intuitions to any great extent.

So, when Miss Parker told Steve about receiving a paper announcing his engagement to Miss Little, immediately the thought flashed in his mind that Miss Little had sent it, but as time went on, and he saw how difficult it would be to prove it, he began to have doubts. These he wished to clear up as soon as possible, for if she was innocent, then he felt he had done her a great wrong by allowing himself to drift into an engagement with her, when he really loved another girl.

However, the good of the country demanded that the thieves be hunted down, and if he was sure that Blackie was not with them, he would be only too glad to help capture them. He pondered the situation for a moment, and seeing that the messenger was surprised at his lack of enthusiasm, went into the house to find his mother, and inquired:

"Did Blackie say where he was goin' when he left?"

"Yes, he said he was going up into Wyoming," answered his mother. "Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered if he was going to come home pretty soon. They are gettin' up a posse to go after them horse thieves, and want me to join, but there ought to be some one here to look after the hay," answered he, giving that as an excuse for his inquiry, so as not to make his mother suspicious.

"Well, he didn't say anything about when he would be back, but never mind the hay. I guess the other boys can manage. It is time somebody went after them. I hate to see you go, but if it is your duty, why, go ahead. I am not one to keep my boys from doing their duty, even if my heart does ache while they are away." And, kissing him good-by, she bade him God-speed as he started on his dangerous errand.

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When he reached Kiowa, he wrote Miss Parker a brief letter telling her he was going up into the mountains on business, and might not be able to write her regularly, and, as a result of his doubts as to Miss Little's guilt, he sent her a short note telling her that he had returned from the East but could not come to see her for a week or so, and would explain the reason when he saw her.

Three detachments of men, all sworn in as deputies, left Kiowa that morning and started scouring the country in search of the rustlers. There was much conjecture as to who the members of the band were. Many thought that it was the same band that had been stealing cattle, and, having found that occupation too dangerous after having been raided the summer before, had established headquarters elsewhere, probably in the mountains, as horses are not as hard to handle as cattle, being able to get over the ground faster.

Ned Alton, who, from his many camping trips, was familiar with the mountains to the south, accompanied the posse headed for that direction, and Steve joined this party also.

As they rode along, they inquired at every ranch and of each person they met, whether they had seen any one driving a bunch of horses, but all day they had received the same discouraging reply. They began to think they were on the wrong trail, when, hailing an old man who lived in a little tumbled-down shack near the road, they put their query to him.

"No, I ain't seen anybody," answered he. "But last night, or this mornin', rather—anyway it was after midnight, my dog barked and run out to the road like he was chasin' something, an' then I heard some one cussin' and they took a shot at the dog—got him, too. Guess he'll die. I got my gun and looked out of the

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door, when I heard him yelpin'. It was so dark I couldn't see anything, but I could hear horses runnin' down the road. They was a lot of tracks along here this mornin', but a feller drove some cows past a while ago, an' ye can't see anythin' but their tracks now," added he garrulously.

"Humph!" said Ned. "Wonder where they struck the road? We didn't find any tracks the way we came."

"Well, they might 'a' come out o' that road that runs right on north from here. It ain't much used, and they might 'a' figured it would be safer as they wouldn't be apt to meet anybody comin' along there."

"They sure must be headin' for the mountains," continued Ned as they started onward. "They probably travel at night, as there are roads all the way to Colorado Springs, and so they would be in no danger of losin' any of their horses."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised if they hid in the Big Trust Timber to-day. Too bad we won't get there in time to ride through it," observed Steve.

"Yes, but I don't think we will get there before sundown now," replied Ned, and this supposition proved to be correct. They made camp in the same little glade where they spent the first night when on their trip the fall before.

It was a soft balmy evening in early June, and as the sun set, the mountains were clothed in changing, exquisite colors, which deepened as day grew dim, until the sky was bathed in a glowing roseate splendor.

This gradually diminished and was finally lost in the inky blackness of a moonless night.

The tired cowboys, as soon as they had eaten, untied their slickers from behind their saddles, spread them down on the ground, and rolled themselves up in their blankets to snatch a few brief hours of sleep before the

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moon rose, which was due about midnight, and soon they were snoring audibly. All but Steve. It was long before he could lose himself in slumber.

He lay and gazed at the stars and listened to the horses cropping the short grass near by. As the campfire died down, and his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he could discern their dark bulk against the horizon. The little glade brought back vividly the other time he camped there, and with the swiftness of the wind, one scene after another passed before his mind's eye, until the final triumph on the mountain top. Like a true optimist he refused to let his mind dwell on the troublesome time which followed, and the still unsolved problem of his engagement to Miss Little, and so he fell asleep.

At midnight they arose and saddled their horses, and, still half asleep, mounted and rode onward. The authorities at Colorado Springs had been notified, but when the posse arrived, had nothing to report. However, upon scouting around, they found a party who had seen a bunch of horses similar to the ones they described being driven toward the mountains, just about daylight, and now convinced that their search lay in that direction, they started after.

All afternoon they traveled along the edge of a mighty cavern. From far below came the roar of the torrent which, through countless ages, had worn the granite bed to its present depth. Along about sunset, coming across a trail which wound down the steep sides and ended in a little valley, they halted and made camp for the night, or until the moon rose, as they still had a good trail ahead over which they could travel by moonlight. About noon they came out upon a large valley, and here they found the ashes of a recent campfire, and many tracks around the lake where the horses had drunk.

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From the distance to the next camp, they judged that the outlaws were pushing ahead and, allowing their horses scant time to eat or rest. The posse was forced to stop more frequently, as their plains-bred horses, unused to mountain climbing, and scrambling over fallen timber and loose rocks, were beginning to show fatigue.

They were surprised when they came to the trail leading up over the divide to find that the outlaws had not taken it, but had kept to the South. This puzzled them for a time, and then Ned remarked:

"Looks like they was goin' the same way we did when we went on our campin' trip. Wonder if there could be any one in that gang that heard us tell about this part of the country."

"Might be," said Steve. "It was talked over pretty generally. Looks like they had laid out their route by our old camps."

It was summer when they left the prairie, but as they went upward it seemed as if the seasons were reversed. Abruptly they passed from summer into spring. Birds flitted about among the trees, as they built their nests, voicing their full-noted mating songs, while the mountain verdure still had a fresh green tint. They rode through thick woods or around mountain spurs; crossing now and then a lofty meadow, thickly sprinkled with wild flowers of every hue, among which the beautiful purple columbines predominated.

Often they skirted the edge of a turquoise lake, or gingerly crossed a clear rushing stream, and as they mounted higher, flowers and leaves gave place to buds just opening.

Being free from all cynicism, and living close to nature, these simple cowboys love and hate with greater intensity than people leading a more complex life, and as he passed each familiar scene, the call of spring

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found an answering echo in Steve's heart. When at last they came to a high, cold region at the foot of the topmost peaks, and crossed the trail that led to the top of the mountain on which he and Miss Parker had plighted their troth, he could not resist the temptation to visit it again.

Telling the rest that he was going to do a little scouting on his own account, he struck off through the timber in the direction of their former camp, and upon reaching it, tied his horse to a tree and started on the rough climb to the summit. He reached it all out of breath and stood for a moment surveying the scene before his gaze came back to the valley at his feet. Instantly he dropped like a stone to the ground, and crawling to the edge peered into the depth below. Moving around in the bottom of the cup-like basin were four or five men and a number of horses. In the center near the lake was a rough cabin built of pine logs and other signs of a permanent camp.

"Hell, it's the camp of the rustlers!" exclaimed Steve. "If I had a pair of field glasses I could tell who they are. I don't believe they even suspect they've been followed. I wonder where they get over the mountains?"

After watching their movements for a while, he hurried back to camp to tell the rest of the posse, and the next morning with the first chill breath that heralded the dawn they arose, and eating a hasty breakfast started up the mountain. Pausing at timber line, they tied their horses and climbed to the summit to reconnoiter, arriving just at sunrise.

The valley was still in shadow, but while they watched, the sun mounted higher, and as the light pierced the gloom, one by one the outlaws appeared in the door of the cabin, and went about their occupations. One carried water farom the lake, another built

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a fire in front of the house and started breakfast, while others walked among the horses as if looking them over and appraising them.

"Quite a happy family, ain't they?" observed Steve.

"Gee, I wish I had a pair of field glasses," said Ned. "But we'll just have to wait until we find a way in, and then make their acquaintance, or renew it one. Wouldn't be at all surprised if we knew every one of them. There's five altogether and quite a bunch of horses. They must be doing a thrivin' business. Suppose they take 'em in from this side somewhere and then take 'em out on the other side and sell 'em."

"I wonder where they get in at?" asked Steve.

"I don't know. Maybe over that low place at the south, but that is a long way round. They sure couldn't take any horses in round here."

Presently the posse made their way back to their horses, and then commenced the tortuous climb around the mountains, searching for a way into the basin. Coming to a place that was absolutely impassable for the horses, they stopped to rest and talk over a plan.

"Let's leave the horses in this meadow here and go in on foot," suggested Steve. "We couldn't take 'em in even if we found the trail, for we'd have to go by daylight, then, and they'd be sure to see us. Anyhow they might take a notion to leave while we was hunting for it. Maybe we can find a place where we can climb down by moonlight and take 'em by surprise."

"I don't know where it would be," said Ned. "Them mountains around that basin look like they'd been split in two in the middle, and the inner half been sucked down through a hole. They are almost straight up and down where timber line starts. But we can try."

"Supposin' our horses take a sudden notion to stray away while we're gone?" suggested Ira.

"Well, we'll just have to borrow one apiece from

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the thieves," answered Steve. "Guess we'll find some of ours down there."

Distributing the camp outfit between them, and unsaddling their tired horses, and turning them loose, they all started again toward the summit. Then spreading out they cautiously approached the edge and peered over, searching for a safe place to make the descent. At last they found a place where the cliff went straight down for twenty-five or thirty feet, and below that was a slanting wall of uneven boulders.

They decided that by tying their ropes around a large rock a little back from the top, they could let themselves down, hand over hand, to the rough place. But they had left their ropes tied on their saddles, and so one of the men hurried back to camp after them. While he was gone the rest ate a hearty lunch from the meat and beans they had taken precaution to cook up before abandoning the horses, and then amused themselves for a time by watching the rustlers who went about their various affairs unsuspectingly.

Presently, when night hid the valley and they caught the gleam of lamplight through the cabin window and door, the cowboys rolled themselves in their blankets and huddled close together for warmth, as they did not dare risk building a camp fire, although the rarefied air was very chill. Some dozed off to sleep before the moon rose bright and luminous, making it impossible to attempt the descent of the mountain.

Tying the ropes together they swung themselves over the side of the cliff which was too sheer near the top for snow to stick to it, but farther down it was packed in the rifts and made the descent very dangerous, as there was no knowing how deep they might be. However, the ropes helped somewhat, and the work was so strenuous it left no time to think of the dangers that lay before them.

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At last they reached timber line, and fortunately for their purpose the mountain at that point was only sparsely wooded, there being only a few stunted pines scattered about. These hampered their progress but little.

At the edge of the valley they paused to examine their revolvers, seeing that every chamber was loaded, and then commenced the stealthy approach toward the cabin. Suddenly the shadows began to lift, and, looking back over their shoulders they saw the sun peeping over the mountain.

"Looks like he was spyin' upon us," whispered Ned, who could not forbear to joke even in the face of danger.

"Two of you guard the window," suggested the sheriff, while the rest of us will go round to the door."

The men were all in position and Steve was about to lift the latch, when a dog put his nose out from under the house, and seeing the strangers, jumped out and began to growl and bark.

Instantly the sheriff thrust open the door and stood in it, a revolver in each hand, shouting as the startled outlaws tumbled out of their bunks:

"Hands up, boys! We have you covered." And the rustlers, half-dazed with sleep, stood up in the dimly lighted room, looking longingly at their weapons which were lying beside their boots or half protruding from their bunks.

"Step over to the wall and line up, commanded the sheriff, and as they obeyed, one of them crossed the room and stopped near the window. As the light struck his face, Steve half groaned out:

"Blackie."

At this the outlaw started and the reason for his moving over to that side lay revealed. Quick as a

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flash he jerked a revolver from the bunk behind him, and, leveling it at Steve, fired, saying:

"Take that, damn ye!" and plunged headlong through the narrow window, carrying sash and all along with him. The sheriff fired as he jumped, and running out they found him lying limp and helpless beside the house, while Steve had crumpled down where he stood.

XXIV

FLINT SENDS A TELEGRAM

In the surgical ward of St. Mary's Hospital at Colorado Springs, lay the outlaw and his victim; each raving in delirium, while back and forth between the cots paced a sad-faced mother, with clasped hands, and lips ever moving in prayer. Armed officers of the law guarded the bed which held the tossing, black head, but other than that the visitor would have noticed no difference in the care the two received. The white-capped nurse tended both impartially, but if they recovered one would be welcomed back to health by loving relatives and friends, while a dreary cell in the city prison awaited the other.

For the most part, the talk of the two ran parallel in their wanderings. The same scenes and same friends stalked alternately through the minds of each, and were mentioned in their rambling, one-sided conversation, which sometimes sank to muttered incoherence, and then was startlingly clear, and through it the different natures of the two lay revealed. Steve mentioned with good-natured tolerance the shortcomings and weaknesses of his friends, while Blackie would now and then break out in imprecations against Steve and the world in general, which showed the poison that had long been working in his soul.

At such times, Mere Gardeau would clasp her hands anew, and murmur heart-brokenly: "My poor boys! Whatever came between them."

And then, as if in answer to her question, each began babbling of their loves. With Steve it was Miss Parker's name which was spoken in loving accents,

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while Blackie was alternately breathing curses against Miss Little for not preferring himself, and vowing vengeance upon Steve for coming btween them. Then at last, as if accepting his lot, he exclaimed:

"Well, let her have him, damn him. He has everything else, and now he has a scheme for sellin' polo ponies and gettin' rich." Then, with a look of cunning, he exclaimed:

"Well, I guess two can play at that game. I know a scheme of two myself. Just a few good pals get together and each work on the side of the range where he ain't known, and the trick is done. We can soon have as pretty a bunch of polo ponies as a man could want, and not cost anything but a nimble use of our wits."

Each day some messenger would ride in from Kiowa or Running Creek and inquire after the boys, and late the following Saturday Ira and Flint came to the hospital on the same errand. They followed nervously after the low-voiced sister of mercy who guided them through the long corridors of suffering humanity until they came to the room where their friends lay tossing on their beds of pain. After listening to their unconscious ravings for a while, and hearing Steve mention the name of Miss Parker frequently, Flint motioned for Ira to come outside and then, lowering his voice, he asked:

"What-you-may-call-it-in-there, I wonder if they have telegraphed her that Steve's been shot and is about to die?"

"I don't know," answered Ira, much puzzled. "I don't know what to make of it. I thought Miss Little and him was engaged."

"Well, they was, in-there," stammered Flint. "But it all started in a joke. He told me all about it at the time, and he just let it go on because he thought Miss Parker had thrown him over. Maybe they made it up

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when he was in New York. Anyway he don't seem to be callin' for Miss Little any. I believe we ought to telegraph her."

"Well, go ahead, then. You do it if you want to."

"Well, you come along. I don't want to take all the 'sponsibility, in-there," answered Flint.

Such is the magic that lies in a slender wire which crosses the continent, that, about an hour later, Miss Parker, upon returning from delivering some of her drawings to the magazine office, was told by her mother that there was a telegram waiting for her.

"A telegram!" exclaimed she. "I wonder what has happened now? Somehow, I do not like to receive anything but letters since I received that paper last year and thought Steve had sent it. Where is the telegram, mother?"

"It is on the table, somewhere. Anna signed for it, and put it there."

"Oh, here it is," answered the girl, picking it up and quickly tearing it open. Instantly it seemed to the listening mother, she uttered a shriek and fell prostrate on the floor.

"My child, what is it?" called the old lady, who was sitting so she could not see what had happened, and as she received no answer, she turned her chair round so she could see in the next room. When she saw her daughter lying white on the floor, suddenly, without thinking of herself or her helpless state, she arose and tottered on shaking limbs to her assistance.

Just then the daughter, who had only fainted, opened her eyes and stared up at the mother, who was bending over her, and then arose almost in fear.

"But, mother, how did you get here alone?" And then, as realization burst upon her, she cried:

"But, mother, you have walked!"

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And the mother, just awakened to thought of herself, sank back into a near-by chair, and gasped:

"God bless me, so I have." And she looked about as if calling all the world to witness the miracle.

For a moment they forgot the telegram in wonder over this thing that had befallen them, and then the mother, in explaining how she happened to do it, said:

"Well, my child, I saw you lying on the floor apparently dead, and I wanted to go to you and couldn't,, so I guess God performed another miracle. But what caused you to faint?"

"Oh, mother. It's Steve, and he's been shot, and is dying, and I must go to him," said the girl, beginning to weep.

"Well, then, you will not go alone. I shall go with you."

"You, mother? But how can you, helpless as you are?" asked the girl through her tears.

"As I was, you must say. Have I not walked?"

"But can you do it again?"

"Of course. Does God perform a miracle to indure only for a day? I now see my way clear; I shall go along. Wire them at once that you are coming, and find out when the next train leaves." And as her daughter, fearing that she would overdo, summoned the family physician, who, like many of his profession, have reduced everything to a scientific basis and leaves nothing to chance or God. He explained the seeming miracle by saying that paralysis was often caused by a shock and was as frequently cured by the same means. When the daughter objected to her mother helping pack, she exclaimed:

"My child, if you had sat still for fifteen years and suddenly acquired use of your legs, don't you think you would want to use them for a while? I shall stand all the way to Colorado." And with that the determined

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old lady went out of the room, and began collecting different articles they would need on their trip.

At ten o'clock that night, mother and daughter started on the long journey to the West. The mother seemed to enjoy every minute of the trip, and would go out on the platform of the observation car and stand by the railing while she watched the country flit by. Now and then some one who happened to be out there at the time would politely offer her a chair, but it was as politely refused.

To her daughter, the train seemed to be moving at a snail-like pace, but at last they reached their destination, and found Steve's father and mother waiting for them, and to the anxious girl their presence at the station meant that there was hope.

From the first it had been noticed that the two wounded men did not have an equal chance of recovery, and strangely enough, it was Steve, who was the more severely wounded of the two, who seemed to be improving more rapidly. This might be accounted for by the difference in the life the two had led of late, as Blackie had been drinking and dissipating steadily since he left home. To the uneasy mother his slow recovery seemed a direct answer to her prayers, as she thought death for him would be a simple solution of all his troubles, and save him further disgrace and suffering.

But with Steve it was different. Perhaps his mind being free from all worry helped. Anyway, there is nothing more conducive to health than happiness and hope, and after Miss Parker arrived his recovery progressed by leaps and bounds, and the physicians pronounced him able to be moved home while Blackie was still raving in delirium.

XXV

BLACKIE ESCAPES

Blackie recovered consciousness a few days later, and lay sullenly gazing at the ceiling. The nurse, seeing he was in his right mind, approached his bed and said:

"There has been a young lady inquiring for you every day since your people left. I think she is downstairs now, and if she is, shall I send her up?"

"What's she like? Is it one of my sisters? If it is, tell 'em to stay away. I don't want any of them snivelin' over me."

"I don't think it is a sister. I think they all went away when they took your brother home. This girl is very pretty and has dark hair."

"Well, then, I don't know who it is, but show her up. It's some sentimental fool that goes around carryin' bouquets to criminals, I suppose."

The nurse disappeared and presently Miss Little timidly stepped into the door:

"Well, what are yau doin' here?" inquired Blackie, never thinking it was she who wished to see him. "They took Steve away several days ago."

"I know they did," answered she. "I came to see you."

"Came to gloat over me, I suppose. Well, it is largely your work—playin' with a man until you drive him to the devil. But you have your just deserts. I hear Steve and Miss Parker are goin' to marry, and you got left in spite of all your schemin'."

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"I knew that long ago," answered she shortly, her temper beginning to rise. "But that isn't what I came to see you about. I've been nearly crazy ever since I heard about you and Steve being all shot up, and about to die. And now you'll be sent to jail, and mother says it is all my work," replied the girl, beginning to weep. "I feel so sorry. I wish I could do something to prevent it."

"Well, I don't know what you can do," observed Blackie gloomily. "While there's generally a woman back of most of the devilment that a man does, it is always the man who has to take the medicine, and the woman weeps a few tears, and then consoles herself with some other fellow, while he swallows the dose."

"Well, maybe that's so, but if they all worried as much as I have they would never do it again. I have thought and thought, trying to find some way to get you out, but so far I have not found a plan."

"Well, if you don't then there's no hope," answered Blackie. "For I don't know anybody that can come up to you for schemin'."

"Well, I will keep on trying, and will come and see you every day, if you wish. I should like to make amends in some way. I have been so sorry ever since you went away. If you had only stayed a little longer you would have found out that Steve and I were only joking that Thanksgiving night."

"Oh, come off!" answered Blackie roughly. "Steve may have been jokin', but you meant it, all right, even if you were too clever to let on. I know you like a book."

"Well, if you know me so well, I don't see how you can pretend it is love for me that drove you to the bad," snapped she.

"That is all right. You and me are two of a kind, and it's that spice of the devil in you that makes me

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love you. I always liked a horse that was hard to manage. Kept me interested. But it was your playin' with me that made me desperate, although I don't pretend I was any saint. In spite of the fact that you had eyes only for Steve, you couldn't let me alone, and every time you saw me sheerin' off in self-preservation you'd coax me back again. You only feel sorry now because I'm about to go to jail, and you sort of feel responsible. But if I was free you wouldn't marry me even now, for all your remorse." And, as the thought took possession of him, he exclaimed:

"If you'd say you would, I'd get free. All hell couldn't hold me."

"Well, I won't say it, because if I did, then you'd do something desperate. You wait, perhaps I can find some way, and then, if I can, we will talk about matrimony, and now I mustn't stay any longer, as that officer may be coming back."

"How did he happen to stay away so long, I wonder? He usually sticks to me like a leach."

"Well, the nurse is a friend of mine, and he is in love with her, see?"

"Yes, I see. What is it a woman can't do, anyhow? From gettin' a man shot to corruptin' the police. Go on with your plannin', I guess I am as good as out now."

"Well, you must not get well too fast. You'll have to play sick until you are strong enough to travel so you will not get a backset, if I do get you out." And with that she blew him a kiss and left the room.

"The little devil," said Blackie admiringly. "The next time she comes, I'll make her make that kiss good." And then the nurse came in and, noting his excitement, gave him a sedative and soon he was fast asleep.

Days merged into weeks, and the weeks into a month, with Blackie still in bed, feigning a weakness

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he did not feel; waiting to gain strength to carry out a plan that Miss Little had at last concocted.

At last, as the time approached, he began to get restless, and Miss Little, noticing his moody looks, inquired what was the matter. For reply, Blackie caught hold of her hand and drew her to him with more energy than a sick man was expected to display and said:

"Look here, I don't trust you. Once I am out of here, if I ever get out, you'll lose all your remorse, and never come to me as you promise. I know you. It is the thing you can't get that interests you. That's why you always wanted Steve, and wouldn't look at me. You knew he didn't care for you and I did. Tryin' to get me out keeps you scheming now, but when that is over you will soon forget. And now I am comin' to the point: I will not take a step unless you marry me beforehand.

"If that plan of yours will work at all, it'll work for two as well as one, in fact, better. To-morrow, when the priest comes, you and I get married, or if not I'll get up and let them see that I am well, and they can take me to jail. I am goin' to ask that officer to get me a license when he goes off duty."

And Miss Little, liking his masterfulness, consented, and, true to her promise, appeared the next morning, and she and Blackie were married by the priest, while the sisters and nurses gathered round. The officer, as if unwilling to intrude an unpleasant feature, kept well in the background.

Blackie, the blood leaping in his veins, with difficulty played the part of a half-dying man, which was supposed to be his role. Restraining himself with a mighty effort he sank back on the bed when the ceremony was over, as if exhausted, while the nurse who was in the plot hurried all spectators away, and she and the officer discreetly withdrew for a few mo-

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ments, leaving the newly wedded pair alone. As soon as the door closed behind them, Blackie raised up in bed, and straining her to him in a passionate embrace, exclaimed:

"So the black sheep has won you at last." And then, as if he had been softened by his recent experiences, he said:

"But I'll try and do the square thing from now on, and if we get out of this, I will be the whitest 'black sheep' that ever lived."

That night the officer began to feel unaccountably drowsy, and, telling the nurse that he must have drunk too much wine celebrating Blackie's marriage, he started to walk up and down the hall. She followed him, and sitting down on the long bench, suggested:

"Oh, you are not sleepy, you just imagine it. Come and sit down beside me and perhaps I might give you that kiss you have been teasing me for so long."

"All right; I guess that will wake me up if anything will." And for the time it did, but the nurse knew her business. The opiate she had put in his wine was no mild one, and soon he was sleeping soundly.

From Blackie's room there could be heard a smothered conversation. Miss Little, already dressed in the costume of a sister of mercy, which the nurse had procured for her, was helping Blackie put on a similar costume, belonging to one of the nurses who was unusually tall and robust.

"Gee, I feel like a fool in all these rags, and must I keep that thing over my face? I'll smother. Loosen up that choker a little. Sister Cleote must be pretty sizable, all right, if she wears these togs, but this business about the face is too tight for me. I am awful glad nuns don't wear corsets or I would balk."

Presently they were ready and started down the dimly lighted corridor. Miss Little longed to pull the

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thick veils across their faces at once, but did not dare, for fear of arousing suspicion. They glided to the stairway and were starting down, when the nurse on night duty in the other corridor, noticing the large sister, exclaimed:

"There goes Sister Cleote, I must speak to her," and started to hurry after, but Miss Little with great presence of mind, motioned her back, whispering:

"Don't interrupt us. We are in a hurry." And the nurse used to obeying, went back to her duty, unsuspectingly.

At last they were on the street, and Blackie straightened himself, drawing a deep breath of fresh air, muttering:

"That was a close shave. You are a clever little girl."

"Hush, you must not speak, your voice will give us away. You must remember we are under the bar of silence. Sisters are often punished that way, and when we come to the light we will pull these thick veils over our faces, and no one will be at all surprised, or suspicious. All we have to do is to keep still, and hide our faces. Steve is just around the corner with a cab, waiting for us."

"Steve!" exclaimed Blackie holding back. "How did he come to be there? He may give us away."

"How can you be so ungenerous. You know Steve would not do any such thing. You must know that it takes money to travel, especially when one is running away from justice, and as I did not have sufficient, and could not get any without telling what I wanted to do with it, I went to him, as he was the only one I could trust. He offered to come and help us off, and it is lucky he did as he is impersonating the cabby, and so we can get to the station without any one seeing us."

BLACKIE ESCAPES

A plain-clothes man sauntered past just as they reached the cab, but seeing it was waiting for the two sisters of mercy, walked on as Steve jumped down off the box and respectfully held open the door for them to enter.

When they reached the depot Steve thrust an envelope containing two tickets and a roll of bills into Blackie's hand, and as he did so, Blackie took his hand and said:

"It is sure mighty white of you to do this, and I will never forget it."

"Nor will I," echoed Miss Little.

"That is all right," said Steve. "We will forget and forgive, but you folks had better hurry, or you will miss your train. I reserved a whole section in the sleeper, so as to be sure no one will bother you. You had better keep right on until you get across the border into Mexico, as then you will be safe."

And that is the last of Blackie and Miss Little. Now and then as they traveled onward, some one noticing the two sisters of mercy, who sat so quietly in the Pullman, and in spite of the heat, kept the thick, black veils of their order pulled over their faces, would approach and speak to them, but the smaller would always hand them a little slip on which was written:

"We are under the ban of silence," and the curious stranger would leave them alone, marveling at such faithfulness and devotion to duty.

The next evening as Steve and Miss Parker sat out on the porch looking off at the mountains and talking of the camping trip, and subsequent events that had indelibly impressed that part of the range on their minds and hearts, Steve said:

"I am afraid we will have to change the plan for our honeymoon, and go somewhere else, as I do not

STEVE OF THE BAR GEE RANCH

believe I ever want to see that basin or mountain again. And by the way, when is that honeymoon goin' to come off. I have been afraid to mention it before for fear your mother might get scared and take you away."

"I do not know. We will have to see what she says. I do not believe she will oppose it much, as she seems to like the West."

"Well, if you can take me along, you can have your honeymoon right away," answered the old lady, who had come out on the porch without them hearing her. "I am just crazy to go up in those mountains. I have sat in a chair and looked up for so long that I would like to build me a house on the top of the highest peak, and look down for the rest of my life. As you will not need a trousseau for a camping trip, you can get married right away. The cool mountain air will do Steve good. And now kiss me both of you and say that mother is not as unreasonable as you thought I was. I am so happy since I can walk that I want to see every one else happy."

Just as she finished speaking Flint came galloping up, and hastily dismounting asked:

"Have you folks heard the news?" and without waiting for their reply, he blurted out:

"What-you-may-call-it-in-there, Blackie has escaped and they are huntin' high and low for him. The nurse drugged the policeman that was guardin' him, and while he was asleep, Blackie hiked out. Don't know where he is gone. They can't find Miss Little either, or rather Blackie's wife, in-there. They was married last Sunday, and I guess they've gone away together."

When he started to speak Steve and Miss Parker exchanged a knowing look, but both endeavored to act as surprised as the rest at the news.

"Well, if that is the case they'll never catch him,"

BLACKIE ESCAPES

stated Steve with conviction. "For you can bet she's fixed up some plan that will get them through all right."

"Well, I hope so," exclaimed Mere Gardeau, fervently. "I hope they'll never catch him."

"Well, I guess they will not try very hard, in-there," said Flint, "now that Steve is gettin' well. If he had died, then it would a-been more serious, but they've still got Bradley and them three other fellows, and that satisfies them. So I guess they will let Blackie go. They ain't put up any reward for his capture. It seems that they are goin' to prosecute Bradley here, and send the others back across the divide. They are wanted on that side for some crime, and the authorities here are only too glad to let 'em have 'em, and save the County the expense of prosecutin' them."

A few days later the Altons, Steve, Miss Parker and her mother all went to Colorado Springs, where the young couple were married, and they all started on another camping trip. Rather a long procession for a honeymoon, the reader will think, but evidently the lovers did not find it any hindrance, for Ned was heard to remark when he returned, that:

"If the Lord would forgive him this time, he would never take another couple on their honeymoon."

END

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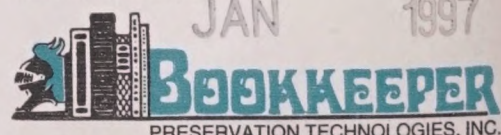
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